

SEPTEMBER, 1959

FANTASTIC

VOL. 8 NO. 9

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Science Fiction Stories

SEPTEMBER

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SOLUTION TOMORROW

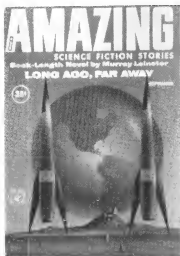
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fantastic

Science Fiction Stories

SEPTEMBER 1959

Volume 8 Number 9

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Cover: TAYLOR OUGHTON

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY, One Park Avenue, New York 16, New York. William Ziff, President; W. Bradford Briggs, Executive Vice President; Michael Michaelson, Vice President and Circulation Director; H. B. Sarbin, Vice President; J. Leonard O'Donnell, Treasurer.



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Editorial

BUGABOOS have a strange way of coming alive long after everyone had dismissed them as bugaboos.

A case in point was the recent testimony of one of our outstanding cyberneticists, Dr. Norbert Wiener. The genius of M.I.T., who knows more about robots than anyone except Isaac Asimov, recently warned that machines of man's creation may eventually turn and destroy him.

Speaking at New York U.'s Institute of Philosophy on "The Brain and the Machine," Wiener said that machines were not necessarily limited in their abilities to the scope intended for them by their human creators.

Pointing out that automatic chess-playing machines have been constructed with high degrees of self-correction and adaptability, Wiener said the same thing could be done with a computer, or even with an automated industrial plant. The machine may be able to control its own performance, he noted.

A machine, said Wiener, does what man tells it to do, not what man wants it to do, or what man *thinks* he told it to do. Thus an automatic factory, programmed for full production, might continue to pour out goods in a time of recession and wreak havoc with our economy.

"But," objected one questioner, "isn't there a big difference between a man's consciousness and a machine's 'consciousness'?"

Said Wiener: "I don't know how to define 'consciousness.' I have no proof that you are not a very well-constructed automaton."

Shall we all write our Congressional representatives to get down to business and pass those Three Laws of Robotics?—NL

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SOLUTION TOMORROW

By CHARLES W. RUNYON

ILLUSTRATOR CUMMERS

*In a world of violence,
the gleaming puzzles
formed patterns of
destiny . . . patterns
that could change the
future, if you could
work the puzzle.*

*Kick, Steven.
Kill, him.
Can't hurt me.*

EACH blow jarred Evan's molars and pushed bubbling grunts through his throat. He heard a bored voice counting cadence some-

where above him: "Ho, Bairn . . . Ho, Bairn . . . Ho, Bairn."

Not Steven, that voice. And I'm no subway brat with gray ankles. No more.

He opened an eye and saw the booted foot. He watched it swing toward him again, stirring the sawdust on the barroom floor.

He let it strike, then grabbed heel and toe and twisted. The man hit the floor, and Evan scrambled on top, looking into a pair of surprised blue eyes. The rest of the face was hidden by a green hood.

Evan jumped up and kicked him behind the right ear with all the strength in a long-muscled leg. He flopped over and lay still.

"Did you kill him?"

Evan turned to see two more hooded men leaning against his bar. "I don't think so—but I should have. He hit me without giving the challenge." He put a hand to the oozing lump above his eye; drew in a slow, stabbing breath. "I thought the Hooded Locals had bylaws!"

The taller of the pair dangled a simulated wooden club from a limp wrist and spoke in a precise, wispy voice. "You're really very lucky, you know. If he were dead, we'd have to mark you for a kill."

"You're a Loner," added the man beside him. "Loners don't rate the challenge."

"Besides, the bylaws only cover pleasure-conflict," said a third man, appearing in the door to dispose of Evan's last statement—and his hope for escape. "We were called in by a Patron of the Local."

"You boys talk like a great team." Evan leaned his tall frame against the mahogany bar, ran long fingers through rumpled, nut-brown hair, and sighed. "What patron?"

The wispy one answered. "Music Man was disappointed in the research you did for him."

"Research? You mean those Porno-hyps?" *Make the front, Evan boy. You know it's those lurid, limpid porno-hyps because it's the only job you've done in three years, and your old man's ashes would dust up a storm if he knew his business had been so basely used.*

"They showed an eighty per cent sex pull," said Evan. "Motivations don't get much higher."

"It isn't moving," said Wispy. "Music Man blew sixty thousand on the strength of your report—but he's not holding you for the entire amount. Just the thousand he gave you."

"He's very kind," said Evan sourly. "Look at this."

Duckboard rattled beneath his feet as he walked behind the bar and punched the ancient, curlicued cash register. It hummed, communed with an instrument eighty miles away in the New Chicago Trust Company, and produced a scolding red figure on the panel. Beside it the letters clicked out: *Credit denied*. The message was clear.

Uppity instrument, thought Evan. *Could have waited until I asked*. Aloud he said: "See that? After the job for Music Man, I had to hire probe subjects to update my motive banks. I had to pay off the local MRB man to give me a probe permit." He made his voice throb with sincerity. "The research job was authentic, I'll swear to that. But the sex drive has dwindled to a mild nudge. Ask Music Man if he hasn't noticed something in his business—"

No, by the sodden soul of Mother Selma, he wouldn't exhort these hoods. He shrugged. "Tell him I don't have the gold, and that's the whole package."

"Bitter, bitter world," said Wispy, reducing Evan's problem to one among millions. "We'll be back tomorrow." He

looked around the barroom. "Is this antique all you have?"

Evan recalled the three-story luxury office with the animated walls. Sold. His efficient team of analysts. Now members of a government Living Unit, secure as pupae in a cocoon and almost as much alive. His two secretaries, home and office. Gone, with tears (some genuine) back to the supplier. And most important, his new crackle finish motivation computer with the five-position probe attachment. Reaped.

"This is all I have," he said, "but it isn't really a—"

Then he was diving toward a brilliant light that flashed from the bottom of a deep, dark well. Before the light went out, he had time to be thankful they hadn't, just for fun, hit him on top of his other lump.

When Evan awoke again, the pounding was in his head. He used the bar to pull himself erect and saw how the hoods had amused themselves.

Bits of antique glassware crunched beneath his feet, irreplaceable wood was hacked and marred, the brass rail was ripped loose and twisted, shelves tumbled to the floor. And a life-sized nude hung in flesh-tinted tatters behind the bar.

But—had they found his most important asset? Quickly he twisted a knob marked LAGER, counting the combination under his breath, then lifted off the entire tap section. He bent to a control panel and spoke: "You all right, Marion?"

"Bloody but unbowed," came the tinny answer. "And I got the ruckus on tape, so we can litigate the hell out of them."

"Erase it," he said, and switched off. Someday, he'd inform Marion that a non-Union member, a Loner, was practically a legal nonentity. But idealism was refreshing, even though he had to find it in a motivation computer.

He searched his face in a mirror-fragment and was relieved to see only the blue-whiteness of a new bruise; not the shiny fungus-green of the kill-mark.

Blue-eyes lived, then. And you too, Evan—keep moving, keep the mind turning, keep the pulse throbbing, for tomorrow . . .

Tomorrow, you may enjoy your last exercise of free will: How to die.

Basil had that choice. Evan remembered the boy who'd quit the hoods and come to work for him—and the morning he'd appeared with the

bandage on his head. "Knew they'd mark me one day, chief—but don't worry. I had it cut out." By noon his eyes were bulging, and he complained of roaring in his ears. By evening he was dead. The unknown virus, released by faulty surgery, had homed on a brain cell and started it multiplying with lightning speed. The boy's head had burst.

Crabones. Evan considered it as he repaired his nude.

Smart thing, what a clever kid would have done was trot off to the Local and ask, "Please, sirs, what's the grievance?" Maybe they'd have neutralized the virus for some dirty little job. More likely they'd have said: "Put on a hood and run with the boys awhile. We'll think of something."

But Basil wasn't smart. Evan wondered if *he* would be.

He was intent on reuniting a dimpled, grape-fondling hand to a baby-fat forearm when he heard a voice behind him. "Are you Evan Bairn? I came about a job."

Evan turned—and forgot about his painting.

He knew the plasticians could mold a woman in almost any shape, and he'd always

looked forward to the new spring body styles. He'd seen them all; the upward tilt, the tube, the flat, the forward thrust, the backward bulge. But no hand had framed this smooth symmetry; she was a soaring eagle among stuffed owls.

Blue-black hair swept like a glossy raven's wing across an ivory forehead, and the eyes matched the hair. The edges of her street robe curved around her shoulders, blended for a moment at the waist, then divided again in a long sweep to her ankles.

From here, thought Evan, every direction is down.

She broke the silence. "I thought you'd be older."

"I am," he said, climbing down and leaning on the bar. "I have extended my life by avoiding repetition. An act repeated is an act wasted. A career a year makes life more dear."

Dark brows drew together. "Really?"

"Not really," said Evan. She was neither hobbyist nor dilettante, from her reaction. "Job, you said. What's your crèche specialty?"

"None. I'm parthenogenetic—mother's side."

Interesting — particularly since nobody was allowed to reproduce solitarily, outside

the birth centers—unless they went underground as his father had.

"You made a poor choice. The motivation research bureau controls all but entertainment—and that's dead now. Here." He took her arm (smooth as honeydew, cool as cucumber) and held her palm against the bar. "Feel that vibration? I've got a million people under there. Not real people—" he added quickly—"but I've got their hopes, their hates, their prejudices; how they react to yellow, why ripe olives remind women of old age and men of childhood; why a bakery makes some think of sex. I've got their nasty mean lowdown urges and their high pure purposes. It's all there, stretching back nearly a century and a half." He broke off, and his voice became flat: "And it's worthless."

"Why do you hide it then?"

"Why hide it?" Hell, didn't she know the Loner's Creed: When in doubt, hide? "My grandfather put it in a bar because he and his customers did most of their business here. I leave it because I never know when the MRB will pull my probe license. I don't want these banks impounded. My grandfather and father collected them, and it's

all—" He stopped and looked into the wide, dark eyes.

"Go on."

"Look, you're an animated, tactile, audible doll — but there's no job here. I haven't had a decent client in three years."

"You look . . . very competent."

"Well, I know my trade . . . and if I didn't, there's the machine. My clients started shaking loose five years ago, but their reasons—crazy, all different. I think the MRB squeezed them out, but I can't prove it. Who investigates the investigator? My trouble is . . . I'll show you." He walked behind the bar. "You know what pornographic hypnosis is?"

"When you're in hypnotic sleep and you think you're actually—"

"Okay, you know." He inserted Music Man's tape in the machine and ran it through, pointing to a dial. "See that? It means that a million old-timers would have stood up on their hind legs and howled to buy this stuff. Good, but . . ."

He bent below the bar, switched the contact to a smaller box. "I probed five hundred Loners last month—can't touch the LUies." He ran it through and pointed to

the unmoving dial. "See—they react like five hundred sex-crazed snails. *Nada.*"

"Interesting," she said. "But life must be dull for them."

"Well . . . most of them don't realize they're not enjoying it. But that's only the first chorus. It may include practically all Loners; perhaps a few others. And not only sex. I tested some old tapes. Ambition, Jealousy. Status Drive. Hate . . ."

"Oh! That can't be. People still strive . . . and hate . . . and kill."

Evan shrugged. "Ever hear of habit? You keep living, because for all you know it beats dying. Believe me, I could show you pages of figures—"

"I'd like that."

"*You would?*" She nodded, and he studied her face a moment. "Wait."

He squeezed through a tiny compartment which would have been a cooler—if the bar had been authentic—and entered a room not much larger. It held a cot, a desk, and an ancient filing cabinet stuffed with the product of his idle years.

He winnowed through scribbled pages written in longhand for secrecy. Few people, particularly MRB

agents, could read. Suddenly, without the smoky eyes driving him on, he wondered if he'd talked too much.

Feeling guilty, he flicked a panel switch and watched the interior of the psuedo-bar appear on the viewscreen. *Gone!* No, she was coming behind the bar, the wispy costume flowing, clinging as she avoided the cracks in the duckboard. Her face was serene as she lifted the reel from the machine.

Evan moved quickly to the door, jerked the handle and—*diablo!*—it came off in his hand. A hundred years of faithful service, and now . . .

It was several minutes before he burst into the bar-room, and she was gone. He ran to look out upon the empty, pitted streets of Old Chicago. Not quite empty; the old panhandler sat cross-legged in his usual place beside the door, holding his hatful of pencils.

Evan made the interrogative on his hands. *A girl left my place?*

No. Saw no one, the beggar dactylographed.

Puzzled, Evan went back inside. He didn't doubt the report, for he'd known the bulbous-nosed old man for ten years—if it were possible to

know someone who couldn't speak or hear.

The public communicator on the wall flashed red and imperative. Evan turned it on; felt the cold hatred twist his stomach as the face appeared.

The man smiled, but the eyes were as cold as the frosty moustache and salt-and-pepper temples. "Evan, you've been fighting again."

Evan made his voice airy. "That's life among the Hoods. What is it, Steven? Did you call to show me your new cosmetic PR job?"

The smile faded, and the face became sharp as an axe. "Hoods are no joke, Evan. You'd better jump on the MRB wagon and let us fight your battle."

"The Bureau can—" he began, then the words penetrated. "Say! You mean the Bureau's after them? Five years ago you said the Hoods were harmless . . . and the Union gave them legal status."

"Hoods are still legal, but . . ." For a moment, the face showed concern, then it was gone. "Forget it," he said sharply.

"Don't tell me," said Evan, "they're starting to work your precious LUies? How many have they cut out of the

herd, Steven? Ten per cent? Twenty?"

Steven's lips tightened. "That's none of your business. It's Classified information."

"Who classified it?"

"I did, just now—" the axe-blade pointed again at Evan, "—as new security steward."

"Ah . . . after ten years, the payoff." Evan's voice was bitter. He saw the muscle jump in Steven's jaw.

"Evan," he grated, "I told you I had nothing to do with father's . . . with *your* father's death. I didn't tell him to try illegal research, and I was only a second-rank analyst when he took Rehab."

"And you couldn't mar your record, even though you knew ten years of Rehab would kill a man his age."

The other man looked briefly haggard, then the face hardened. "You're still kicking a dead horse, Evan, and I haven't time for it. I called to tell you the Bureau is suspending your probe permit pending investigation of charges that you defrauded an entity called . . . Music Man." His lips twisted in a smile. "That's a new low, Evan, scratching in your bin of dated ids for a smut peddler—and conning him besides."

Evan was suddenly too sick

to argue. "She worked fast, didn't she?"

"Who?"

"Your agent, the female flannel. She just left."

Steven frowned. "We're acting on a tip, not a flannel's report. What girl?"

So Steven knew nothing about her—but a scent would start him digging like a ferret. He decided to spare her that. "She was nobody . . . a job-hunter." He loaded his voice with sarcasm. "Now, are you through, Steven? Got your charge for today? May I switch off, your Stewardship?"

A white line appeared around Steven's lips. "You always did need a keeper, Evan. Don't try any probing, or you'll get one—in Rehab. We'll be watching." His long-fingered hand flipped the cut-off switch.

Evan watched the image fade to a glittering square, then slid onto a barstool. Riddle of the day: What has two smooth legs, is neither clubber nor flannel, and steals worthless porno-hyps? Answer next week, or later.

It had been simpler when he could divide his enemies into two large groups. Acquiring a third—if enemy she was—was like being

stung by a bee while caught in a crossfire.

He reached two decisions: One, he would close up; two, get out of town. Neither appealed to his vanity; both seemed brilliantly logical.

He was replacing the concealing panel on the computer when he saw the tape inside. An untitled reel. Had she put it there to conceal the disappearance of the other? Or did it contain a message?

Idly, he flipped on the test switch and ran the tape through the new motive bank. His eyes widened as the pointer jumped off one peg, swung over to hover against the other.

"Marion, check your reporting circuit."

The answer came in ten seconds. "This kid is double-oh error-wise. Why the static?"

The glib, two-century old slang came through in a flat monotone, but it stirred Evan's excitement: "Give me a verbal reading on that last test."

"Pure gold. Ninety-nine point nine nine nine nine nine—"

"Hey! Impossible!"

"But true."

"What's the motivation?"

"I have no name for it."

"Names are for babies."

Evan stilled his excitement; thought hard. "Let's try similarities. Is it related to sex?"

"Negative."

"Fear?"

"Negative."

"Anger?"

"Not quite."

"Desire?"

"Throw that on the floor and walk around it."

"Desire?" Evan turned the thought over and examined it from the other side. "Frustration?"

"Natch. Frustration is implicit in desire. Fulfill a want and you eliminate it."

"Spare me the philosophy," said Evan. "I fed you that line years ago." Still, it seemed significant. Perhaps there was a connection.

He took the probe helmet from the safe and settled it on his head like an overturned bowl of spaghetti, feeling the contacts wriggle into place and cling to his skull. He chewed a marco capsule and relaxed.

Sleep . . .

The dream was life, and life was a bitter burlesque with Evan as top banana. He was in a room laying a carpet. Each time he rolled out one end, the other end rolled up and struck him from the rear. He tried again and again,

weeping in frustration, wondering why he was so clumsy.

Then he noticed he had no arms.

He heard laughter outside his room and was enraged. He dashed at the walls, rebounded countless times from the pulpy substance, and wondered why he couldn't break through.

Then he saw his legs were gone.

Suddenly he was on a sunny summer beach, one of a group seated in a circle. They had been playing a game, but they had stopped when he appeared. He felt their scorn and tried to explain that he only wanted to watch and learn the game.

But the stub of his tongue bumped against his palate and air whistled unimpeded through his throat.

They left him—all but one. She was ebony and ivory and soft shadow, and she seemed to promise ecstasy if he would complete himself.

How?

Her lips moved, telling him how, but he could no longer hear . . .

After it ended, Evan didn't move for several minutes; not until he had sent nerve messages to his arms and legs and found them intact. His heart

pumped and his neck was dewy with sweat.

Madre! He'd probed himself many times, but never been torn apart like that—and that was only the conscious reaction. Weakly, he lifted off the helmet and spoke to the machine: "What did you get from the sublevel?"

"I repeat: pure unsimulated gold. As though I had been built with a part missing and had just found it out. But I wouldn't know which part; a unique experience."

"Any organic equivalent?"

A pause, then: "I have a reference here under ethology. Appetitive behavior. Animals, motivated by instinct, become agitated or restless when they can't perform some consummatory act. A bird is prevented from building a nest, for example, or a tadpole is unable to grow legs."

"And humans?"

"I know of no human equivalent . . ."

He reached out to cut it off, stopped as the speaker sounded again.

"Something here in the old banks; hard digging through old magnetic film. A classic campaign during the twentieth century prosperity era featured a man with an eye patch. Catalogued as a status

symbol, but evoked an inexplicable amount of empathy at that time."

"That's something. The missing eye is similar to my—oh!" Evan's hand flew to his head as a hot rapier of pain stabbed his brain. Then it was gone, leaving an aching numbness. "—my dream. It could have been an early manifestation of this . . . incomplete sensation."

He left the computer and squeezed into his office. He found what he wanted in the files: an old poster his father had given him, "Keep it," he'd said. "But keep it hidden. You'll understand some day."

The paper was yellow, the spelling old-fashioned, and the type—set on a metal mold typesetter—had been out of style for thirty years. He read it again:

THE IMATERIALIST MANIFESTO

In this most perfect Union:

1. Ther is no deth penaltie
2. Ther is no lethal weapons
3. Ther is a job for everyone and he is trayned for it from berth
4. Ther is no want for food and shelter and the other gud things of life.

BUT

If we're so rich wy arn't we happie?

The question was rhetorical; those who had printed the poster had known the answer.

Evan thought hard, concluded that the manifesto was true—and false.

No death penalty, sure. But the Union gave no longevity drugs in rehabilitation centers. So his father had died at ninety—with sixty years cut from his life span. There were ways and ways.

No lethal weapons. But there was the cell-destroying cyto-gas. He'd seen people who arrived too late at the cyto immunity center. There must be thousands of better ways to die.

Job security? Good for LUies, maybe. Let them be riveted to one occupation and one living unit from birth to death. But were they happy in their 16-hour-a-week jobs? The hobby clubs showed otherwise. They were looking for *something*.

What could it be? The Union held that rank-and-filers should get what they wanted. And motivation research decided what rank-and-filers *really* wanted—so

the Motivation Research Bureau controlled the Union.

Sure, some people got left out.

His old business clients were little more than collectors from the public and payers to the Union. That, or a Union congress nationalized them for the public good.

Oh, the Movement was pure—once. Corrupt locals were outlawed. But they descended quickly to unblushing gangsterism and became the Hooded Locals.

Freedom? Sure, people could live where they wanted and work where they chose. They had only to leave the Movement—and be ground between Union on one side and Hoods on the other. Loners.

And MRB was nothing more than a police organization preserving the status quo.

Evan put the poster back in the file. Someone had tried to break the system thirty years ago when he was born.

Had they been defeated? Obviously. The system ground on.

Obliterated? Likely.

Could it be revived? Evan shrugged. Something was happening. Witness his motive banks. Witness the tape.

Whatever it was, the tape held something strange; maybe powerful. Find the girl, of course. In the dream, she had offered (promised?) some sort of fulfillment . . .

He was crossing the street when he heard the panhandler's tapping. *They're waiting at your aircar. Hoods.*

Why?

The man touched his forehead with a grimy hand, and Evan felt ice in his stomach. The Mark.

Had Blue-eyes died? Or had they merely changed their plans, intending now to let him work out his fee as a club member? It made no difference. He'd never seen an ex-Hood, alive.

A sooty neo-gothic monstrosity blocked off the lot in which Evan kept his near-junk aircar. They hadn't seen him—yet. He turned down the street and kept in shadow, walking just slowly enough not to attract attention.

Three blocks away, he was approaching a derelict hotel when he saw a man slouched in a doorway, cradling a short metal tube in his arms. Evan saw the gray suit, antiquely styled with separate coat and trousers, and turned quickly to walk back the way he'd come. A chopped, deris-

ive laugh sounded behind him, and Evan broke into a trot.

Madre! He'd almost strolled into it. The gray flannel suit marked the man as an MRB agent on duty, and the hotel was occupied by defecting LUies who had elected to dwell in social anarchy outside the Movement. Put them all together, they spelled probe-raid. Evan's skin crawled as he thought of the cyto-gas that would soon swirl in the street.

He saw his shop ahead—and his stomach took another dive. Three Hoods were standing in front of the old pan-handler. Now they knew he was gone, and they'd spread out, looking for him . . .

The wind, at least, was in his favor. He turned back and watched two dozen men and women boil out of the hotel and begin running down the street. They had gone only a few yards when the man stepped out of the doorway and raised the tube. Evan heard a cottony explosion and saw the pink mist envelop the group.

When it cleared, the group stood silently in the street. They waited while the man in gray was joined by another, then followed as the pair walked carelessly ahead. Evan

hurried to join the shuffling group.

He walked with knees bent to shorten his conspicuous height, and watched a woman leave the sidewalk and join the parade. She fell in beside him and sighed noisily.

"Today! I had to blunder into cyto today!"

Evan grunted and kept his head down.

"Just a little touch on my shoulder," she went on. "Sometimes I think everybody should wear hoods like those evil locals. And this was the day I was to join the Artists Club—" she threw back her shoulders and emphasized her breasts "—as a model. Now, I'll be stuck under a probe helmet for eight hours before I can get my immunity shots. Now, do I have a grievance?"

The shrill complaint was drawing attention. "Shut up," Evan growled, jabbing with his elbow.

He heard her gasp and watched her bounce away, shoulders back. Sure she had a grievance; but she didn't have a choice. If she didn't get shots within sixty hours, the cytoplasm in her cells would begin dissolving. Did she want to turn into slime?

He'd have had to submit to a probe, too, if he'd been touched. Only the MRB knew

the different chemical combination used in cyto—and the guns were freshly charged each day.

He looked up and saw the bright red cross on the building ahead. The group was filing into the immunity center. *Wake up, Evan.*

He peeled off into an alley and followed it to an aircar lot. He searched until he found a heap that looked air-worthy—and cheap. It wasn't.

"You don't like it?" said the woman attendant, her wrinkled neck telling of too long between plasticians. "I don't either. But as long as I pay a two hundred per cent surtax on Loner rentals, you pay triple."

Evan shoved all his money into her hand, slammed and locked the door—before she could count it. He inserted his license and citizenship plate into the panel slot and asked for a beam to Regina.

The beam pulled him into a low level traffic pattern, just as the woman began to shout and pound on the door. Over the Near North crèche, he saw the thousand-foot spire with the orange brick living units radiating outward, and remembered . . .

He and Steven, before his father found them. Steven

leading in group games, with enough energy left to help Evan survive them; Evan repaying him, by helping with his studies. Two among a million, learning stat-theory and motive-analysis. Ugh!

The low sun reflected off the executive domes which floated near the lake shore like soap bubbles on blued water. Steven would have one now, of course, as security steward. He'd reached a level where the mass thinned out, but the meaningless game was the same; only the stakes had changed. That wouldn't bother Steven; he played to win, not for the prize.

Then the pleasure-domes were behind and he was climbing high over the geometric factory-LUs of Skokie. The tumbled green of non-Union Deerfield was conspicuous in the distance, like a single tree on a desert.

Not a bad word-image. Altitude did wonders for his brain, and Evan reflected that poets could do worse than compose in aircars. (*And have you read Bairn's latest, Ode to Anoxemia?*)

Poems and poets, nevertheless. Who could read them, and who would feed them? What creative drive could survive life's triangle: birth center to crèche to living

unit? He lived in a womb-world, where the many were born, educated, housed, fed, and entertained in complete passivity. How could they tell when they died? (*LU Directive 368042: It has been noted that citizens often report for cremation before they are completely dead. In the interests of fuel conservation . . .*)

Evan shook off his day-dream and switched on the play viewer. He watched the story of a LUie nudist group whose island paradise was being left behind by a receding ocean. He followed the thin, watery story line with a fraction of his mind and used the rest trying to fathom the planted message. Which he knew had to be there.

It didn't come through until the next show—a film story on sea mining which showed tons of sea water gushing into vast evaporation reservoirs.

Alone, it was innocuous. Tacked to the nudist bit, it performed a masterful axe job on the sea miners. Evan perceived the subtle hand of the MRB on the axe, recalling the IMW senator's privileged floor blast at the "big mining lobby." And an upcoming bill to create an agency for controlling the sea-miners. They

were being set up for the kill, and nobody would stop them.

And Evan's head ached with a low throb, like the pounding of distant surf.

He stiffened, suddenly alert, as a yellow light glowed intermittently on the control panel. Another ship rode his beam, drawing nearer.

Quickly, he switched the car to manual control, wrenched the vanes to vertical, and fed power to the underjets. The craft shot straight up, pressing him into his seat.

At 25,000 feet, he veered sharply left for twenty miles, then dropped like a falling rock to level off at 200 feet. The detector stopped blinking, and Evan relaxed.

Regina was out now; that left the lodge. He pictured the rambling wooden structure he'd built and whimsically furnished during his good years, with porch pilings awash in a Minnesota lake. He'd never registered it among his possessions. At first it was too insignificant; later too much of a tax burden. It would be safe.

A half-hour later, he settled the aircar gently between two tall pines. Low clouds, reflecting light from the vanished sun, were mirrored on the

lake, and the rambling wooden structure was silent. His feet on the loose boards of the porch made a lonely sound.

He scratched an ear of the three-headed dog beside the door, activating a message circuit.

"A damsel awaits within, thou Spawn of Hate," said the center head.

Evan looked quickly up to the roof and checked his blue invitation light. It wasn't on. "Why did you let her in?"

"She knew the required words, O Evil Incarnate."

Well! That ruled out the vacuum-headed hedonists who usually appeared when he felt lonely, depressed, or drunk enough to turn on his light. And he knew only one other female.

He pushed open the door and brushed past the wooden Indian standing inside. "By the shores of—"

"Shut up!"

The Indian clicked off.

He found her in the game room. She glanced up as he entered, then returned to conversation with his antique, bubbling Wurlitzer. She had changed to a white coverall that sheathed her body so smoothly he couldn't tell where cloth ended and flesh began. But it was the same girl.

He shut off the machine and faced her. "You weren't looking for a job."

"No." Her smile was serene. "You have an interesting place here . . . Cerberus guards the door, an Indian recites Longfellow, and the bed delivers a Mather polemic. You're a strange, Masochistic man. I knew about the lodge, but I never visited it before."

She seemed no longer a bright eager girl, but projected a calm assurance that filled the room and deadened the subconscious screech of worry.

"So—" she spoke again, when he said nothing. "Did you play it?"

"Of course." He pressed his hand to his side and felt the bulge of the tape beneath his shirt.

"How did you feel?"

"I felt . . . sick with frustration." He thought back—and the pain stabbed his brain again, making him gasp. "I still am!"

She nodded, but he read nothing in her expression. "Could you spread that feeling through the world?"

"Spread it? Through mass communications?"

She nodded.

He sat down. To be doing *something* again, set pulses

racing in the veins of an Omaha mech, or stir the psyche of a child-bearer in Dubuque . . . this was the stuff of his life. The drive that went deeper than a profit motive. But . . . "You're asking me to create a demand, with nothing to fill it."

"We'll fill it, when the time comes."

"With what?"

She shook her head, and smiled. "Later."

Evan shrugged. The object wasn't important at this time, but there were other problems. The MRB would oppose the campaign. That would mean bribes to flannels and commissioners. And the Hoods wanted to mark him. He had no idea how much payoff they'd need. The Music Man—perhaps he'd have to throw some business his way . . .

He ticked off a dozen problems and millions in costs. She listened without comment, then took a roll of paper from her sleeve and handed it to him.

He scanned the ancient, stylized script—a charter, stating that International Amusements was incorporated in the State of New Columbia, that its president was—

"Hey! What am I doing in here?"

"You'll handle distribution, sales, everything. It's simpler."

"And I'm in front if anything goes wrong," he said.

She met his eyes steadily, and his neck grew warm. "Things may go wrong, yes," she said finally. "But most of us can't be seen in public. If you would feel safer knowing who we are—"

"No!" He didn't want to be caught and probed with a membership list written on his mind. "I don't want any more information than I need for the job. But why pick me?"

She smiled faintly. "You were the only competent MR man left outside the MRB. And you seemed ready for . . . what we're trying to do. The only thing I had to do was learn if you could be trusted."

"And . . . ?"

"Obviously, you can be. You didn't tell your brother about me."

"Steven is not my brother!" he blazed. Then, amazed at his heat, controlled his voice. "We happened to be prenatally nurtured by the same woman—a Puerto Rican professional mother. He was a complete fertilized ovum and so was I. We were never

anything closer than . . . wombmates."

Her smile brightened the room. "Yet you grew up together."

"Because our fathers disappeared before we were born. Mother Selma supported us by having six children every three years, living underground because of the birth limitation. We fought all the time, and Steven usually won. Once he nearly killed me to get a pair of shoes. Selma died when we were ten, and my father came back from . . . wherever he'd been when we were fourteen." For a moment he recalled the tall, confident man with deep-carved lines around his mouth. "Steven's father didn't come back, though he tried to claim—"

He stopped. It had begun to sound like a lament. "I'll need cash to work. I couldn't buy a used walkway transfer now."

"It's in your account at New Chicago Trust. I put it there when I left your place." She glanced at her watch and stood up. "I have to go. They're coming for me."

Evan watched her fluid movement across the room, noting the shifting stresses on her skin-tight garment. A question stirred inside him;

a physical, not intellectual, question. Could her marble serenity be shattered? Was her flesh always cool? Or could it glow with heat, and could the calm voice descend to a throaty sob . . . ?

"Wait."

She turned, poised in profile. And he saw his answer. A child might fingerprint on the Mona Lisa, an ape could slobber in vintage wine; but Bairn would never . . . No, whatever she'd promised in the dream, it wasn't flesh. "Tell me . . ."

"Sari."

"It fits. Sari, how did you know I'd take the job?"

She stood for a moment, and the delicate brows met. "You were like us. You had no choice."

International Amusements, Inc., he learned next morning, controlled over 20 million man-year credits.

Power.

Evan felt like a town drunk who learns that a rusty key he's found in a trash heap will open every bar in the city. But he suppressed the impulse to buy all the media time on the market.

The potter's hand should leave no print, he thought. He stayed at the lodge and made his opening moves from be-

reported sadly that his customers had left the darkened booths pale and stricken, and never returned.

It was the only failure. As nearly as Evan could tell without probing, the trademark—a rectangle containing 15 black squares and one white one he'd taken from the charter—had come to symbolize frustration.

He was in the tiny room behind the bar when his communicator flashed.

"Need anything?"

The screen was blank, but the same serene voice had echoed in Evan's mind for two months.

"Do I? I'll be ready to sell in a week and what am I selling? You tell me."

"A puzzle."

"I'm selling a *puzzle*?" He felt let down—but what had he expected? "How big is this toy?"

"Two inches square. Weight three ounces. Is that enough?"

"Wait . . ." He scribbled it on the wall. "Where can I see you?"

"If it's urgent, ask the pan-handler."

He heard the click and she was gone. He swore and tried to trace the call. It ended in a public booth in Tokyo.

Elusive was the word for

Sari. Like the thing he was supposed to sell, a puzzle. The word, in fact, described the whole operation. It also stirred a memory.

"Puzzle fads come and go," reported Marion. "Biggest was the 14-15 puzzle—a rectangle with 15 movable numbered squares with one square empty. Problem: put them in consecutive order. Possible arrangements: 20 trillion. Solution: Impossible, since the correct arrangement was on the other side of parity."

Now Evan knew the source of the trademark—but there was something else. "Give me the latest fad."

"No fad—but here's a feather to blow around the room. Thirty years ago, an entity called the Gamesman tried to introduce a game. He was convicted of anti-Movement activity — specifically, violation of the law against non-group games—and granted Rehab."

"Where is he now?"

"There was a report of his death at MacKenzie Bay Rehab center, unconfirmed."

"What kind of game?"

"Unknown. The MRB was unable to acquire specimens."

Interesting—but not helpful—and Evan had work to do.

Distribution he visualized as a military campaign. He found a building company still in private hands; started them prefabbing outlet stores and shipping them around the world. Big artillery.

He got sales outlets in all non-Union stores. Small artillery.

He laid down a million and a half to organize a hobby club of suitcase peddlers. More than a hundred thousand members began training for Distribution Day. Infantry.

The all-media blast was two days away when he got a call from the media commissioner. Evan convinced him the set wasn't tapped, watched him tug nervously at his earlobe, and braced himself.

"Your media license bounced!" the man blurted finally.

Evan sighed, not particularly surprised. Since the suspension of his probing permit he'd been waiting for the MRB to drop the other shoe. "You need more than seventy-five thousand?"

"No, no, no." He made a pushing gesture with both hands. "It isn't money. I spread the money but it's bigger than the commission, and I can't afford to jeopardize my position further by—"

Evan cut him off, feeling

cold contempt for the bureaucrat. *Should be a law against taking a bribe and not delivering*, he reflected, dialing again.

Steven seemed only too delighted to explain: "You filed a script showing a man unhappy in a Living Unit. That's classified as Tending to Create Dissatisfaction with Our Way of Life, and prohibited under Article one-eighteen, section fifty-nine, paragraph seventy - one of the communications workers code."

"All right," said Evan. "It's only one show. I withdraw it."

"You can, of course," Steven smiled. "That will be accepted as admission of guilty intent, and your entire campaign will be impounded as evidence of anti-Movement activities. Article twenty-three, section—"

"Enough, Steven." Evan rubbed the back of his aching head. The gesture had become almost habitual. "Forget the whole thing. We won't use media."

Steven put on his sincere look. "My advice, Evan boy, is to get out of it. You're a little catspaw in a big, big game."

Don't remind me, Steven.

hind a blind communicator. Isolated events occurred.

An egghead magazine began a series headed: What is Surfeit?

An editor bought a new air-car.

The world's top comic used the tag line "something seems to be missing" three times in a single show. Within a week, the same line was used 3,410 times by other comics.

A gagwriter moved into a Mediterranean pleasure dome.

Three hobby clubs—street-walkers, panhandlers, and birdwatchers—suddenly had funds for new clubhouses. The same day, members began making their rounds carrying a sandwich board showing a man with material wealth—money, food, clothes, jewelry—piled about him. His sad eyes seemed to follow the viewer as a voice asked: "Are you sure you have *everything*?"

The men who clung to the world's moribund amusement business paid their debts and back taxes.

And in the major amusement centers, a 100-foot-story sign began blazing. In it, an armless man met a series of frustrations—tried to fumble his LU tag into a walkway scanner; dialed a meal; made love—while a voice clucked

sympathetically and asked: "Have you ever felt like this?"

"Ten . . . twenty years ago," a manager told Evan on the blind circuit, "the great godly public would have smashed the things and picked their teeth with the pieces. Now they stand there, quiet, while the story comes across. Sometimes men and women get into fights, but nobody bothers the signs."

Evan decided secrecy was no longer necessary—or desirable. He bought peace with the Hoods (ridding himself of an anticipatory itch on his forehead) and moved back to his tavern. The grapevine trembled and pulsed, and the tavern became the focus for an Anschluss of destitute flacks, entertainers, writers and talkers.

Music Man got back his thousand credits, and opened his darting, itchy eyes wide when Evan asked him to put the Something-is-missing message into a porno-hyp.

"My customers ain't milk and custard types," he said, and his fat cheeks trembled. "They'd string me up by the—"

"Try it," said Evan, peeling off another 50,000.

Music Man did. Later he

Steven lifted a paper from his desk. "Our flannels report that two months ago you were in debt, broke and without prospects. A girl walked in, stayed twenty minutes, and left. Two hours later you left town, filed a flight pattern for Regina then broke it without authorization. And you shook off the flannel." Steven winked. "This boy is flannel no more. A Peruvian guano-pickers local needed a steward." His face hardened again. "When you got back three weeks later, you were involved in a ten million credit campaign for a previously nonexistent company which lists you as president."

"So—that makes me a criminal?"

"Not you—yet. But the girl . . . there's a femme we'd like very much to probe. No birth record. No LU record. No record of application for Union contraceptives. No longevity drugs. I can't even locate her plastician!"

So she was an illegal Parth, and then some. *Ah, women! You register to have babies, you register not to have babies. You sign for life, and you sign for looks. When you change faces, your plastician files new photos and pore-patterns. You're boxed in by benefits, and you don't, you*

can't, live without getting on a Union list.

But she had.

"I'm not probing," he said. "You can't stop me from selling."

Steven laughed. "I can do anything if the old men on Teamster Hill declare an emergency. The LU situation's getting worse, fast, and I've started the machinery moving. Don't get caught in it, boy. That's all." He cut off.

This was the emergency she mentioned, thought Evan.

The old Panhandler claimed to know nothing at first, but Evan was persistent.

Come back in an hour, signalled the old man finally.

Evan went inside, watched the hands on his watch crawl around the dial—and stared at the beggar's unmoving back through the dirty tavern window.

The hour ended, and Evan went out again; watched the old man's hands form the words: *Go to the College.*

Evan hurried away, puzzled. If the old man had known, why did he wait an hour? And if he hadn't known, how did he find out? Chalk up another question.

A block from the tavern, he descended to the damp,

cold third level. He picked his way among the rubble, remembering his only visit to the College. He and Steven had wandered in accidentally, and he had been awed by people who talked of strange things; others who merely looked strange. They had been ignored despite Steven's teasing, and Steven wanted to come back and set a smoke bomb in one of their tunnels. Evan had refused, and they had never gone back to the college again.

He saw the branching corridor, and the whitewash smear on gray concrete:

THE COLLEGE OF

Soot from an old campfire blotted out the rest.

Evan walked in—and nearly stepped on a man. He sat in the middle of the tunnel, with incredibly thin legs—three times as long as his torso—crossed in front of him.

"Do you have any idea where I can find—"

"You can find truth in silence," muttered the creature, chin on chest. "An idea cannot know itself."

"I didn't mean—"

"Contradiction is proof of error, for truth cannot be contradicted."

The hell with truth. Evan stepped over a sticklike leg and went on. The next turn

carried him past a recess in the wall, and he paused to look in at the man who plodded on a six-foot long treadmill. He turned his red-furred head and enveloped Evan with a pair of green, saucer eyes, open in perpetual astonishment.

"Are you with it?" he asked, still plodding.

"With what?"

The creature hawked, and Evan jumped back as the stuff spattered the corridor at his feet. He walked on, and behind him, he could hear the man break into a trot on the treadmill. *Move over*, thought Evan. *I may join you later.*

He turned his eyes as he passed three more. They were getting worse. Then the tunnel was blocked by a turnstile. The keeper turned a boyish, downy-cheeked head toward him, while the other head, old and wrinkled, was bent toward a massive book.

"Pass?" asked the boy-head.

"No."

"Tesseract." He held out a seven-fingered hand.

"What?"

"A square, in four dimensions. *Turista. Pay.*"

Well, they had to live—he supposed. The freaks hadn't told people to meddle with

their embryos—but you couldn't transfer nuclei without pushing an atom out of line now and then.

He was searching through his pockets when he heard a thunderous feminine voice: "I'll take him!"

He looked up to see two huge white arms stretching toward him, felt himself lifted over the turnstile. Feet dangling two feet from the floor, he looked into an eager oval face fringed with crisp blonde curls. His eyes moved down the naked 8-foot body and he saw that the giantess was fantastically, perfectly proportioned.

"Put me down," he said, trying for a tone of command. He felt like kicking and screaming.

"You came to the College to study?" she asked brightly, still holding him. From two feet away, he could feel the heat of her body.

"No. I came to meet someone."

Her lower lip protruded. "Everybody studies here. I study . . . love!" The corridor spun. He was cradled in her arms and a mammoth, jutting breast filled his field of vision. He felt the bounce of her walk, heard a door open and glimpsed a huge room, its

giant furniture dominated by a bed the size of a handball court. Then he was flying.

He sank deep into the feathery mattress. He floundered to the surface and saw her approaching. He squeezed his eyes shut and rolled over and over, landing on his back on the other side. When he looked up, she was peering over the edge, her blue eyes worried.

"Listen!" he said quickly. "I came to see Sari. You know her?"

"You're Sari's?" The child-face crumpled and a large tear splashed on his face. "Can't you stay a little while?"

"No." He stood up. "Will you take me to Sari?"

She led him out and down the corridor. Walking several paces behind, Evan could watch the vast, smooth-rolling expanse of bare flesh more objectively; decided she'd be lovely on a more reasonable scale. *Beauty, thou wild fantastic ape!*

Funny he'd never itched for the big ones. But Mother Selma, Dago Red and all, had mothered him. Most men weren't mothered at all—hence the underground traffic in cultured giantesses. A little DNA to make 'em big, a shot of cortin to speed up sex de-

velopment, and in ten years, *mire!* A mother-image.

She stopped beside a door. "Sari's room."

"Does she live here?"

"She comes and goes. But I am always here."

Evan looked up and saw the infant pleading on her face. He jerked open the door, slipped inside, and pushed it shut.

"I was expecting you."

He whirled to see Sari, serene in a reclining chair, a white wrapper gathered around her shoulders. She waved a long white hand at a chair opposite her. "Relax ... and tell me what you want to do about the media license."

Great Gompers! Did she know everything? "I'm moving up D-Day. From now on, interest will run downhill with nothing to feed it."

"When?"

He handed her a micro-reel. "Distribution points. How soon can you supply them?"

She stood up and went out another door. In ten minutes, she was back. "They're moving now. It'll take eight hours." She tossed a translucent cube into his lap. "There's one."

Evan felt the cube's satiny surface caress his fingertips, seeming to contain a sensu-

ous warmth of its own. Within the cube, hundreds of tiny, colored fragments floated in a clear liquid. Their constant, swirling motion was hypnotic, and he lost himself in watching.

Later, he found that the cube had become pliable under his fingertips. He could alter the flow of fragments. He knew the fragments could merge into a pattern, and he knew (almost) what the pattern should be. He nearly had it three times; three times it dissolved into swirling chaos. It was like a memory that kept sliding back into mental deeps—but this was a memory he'd never had.

Pain throbbed in his head and broke his concentration. He looked up, saw the woman watching him—then remembered who she was. He looked at his watch. Three hours gone!

"Can it be solved?" he asked finally.

She nodded. "If one knows the solution."

He rubbed the back of his head and some of the fuzziness left his brain. "You mean it must be accomplished before it can be attempted?"

She nodded, and he gave it to her. "Accomplish it."

Her fingers were a blur on the surface of the cube. Sud-

denly, the flow of the fragments stopped, and she gave it back to him.

The pattern was beautiful, but—"It isn't quite right," he said.

"You mean it's close?"

Evan looked into her wide eyes and nodded.

She was silent for a minute, studying him with a perplexed frown. Then: "Each person finds his own solution to the puzzle. No other is right."

Evan stood up. "In this deal, nothing is right!" The frustration within him broke through, and he paced the room in long strides. "You come to my place on a pretext and plant a tape. Next I find you at my lodge—a place I thought nobody knew about. You offer a screwy proposition, and it happens to be the only time in my life I'm in a mood to accept. And for two months I work in the dark—then an old beggar turns out to know more about you than I do!"

Her eyes followed his movements. "We will know each other some day, I promise you. What can I tell you now?"

"Nothing!" He stopped and looked down at her. "Don't tell me anything, because these things—" he waved the

cube—"these things will land me in probe as sure as my name is Bairn!"

"You want out? You want us to find someone else?"

He sat down and rubbed his head. "No. You picked the right man; you picked well. I've watched the hobbyists chase their imitations of life. I've seen the LUies, without posterity or incentive, not even trying to imitate life. I've watched the Hoods, bored with sadism, become more sadistic in their boredom. And I've watched the Union try to be all things to all men; to balance society on a fence between past and future. That furry thing in the corridor—he's Everyman. For years I thought: My God! This game must end! I wanted to push man off the fence, and I didn't care whether he fell forward or backward. Now, finally, I think I'm pushing. Am I right? Will there be a revolt?"

"At least," she said.

He stood up, suddenly drained of emotion. "All right," he said softly. "That's all I need to know."

Eight hours, she said . . . and in nine hours Evan had his first problem.

Baghdad Hoods hijacked the city's puzzle shipment on

a tip that the cartons held longevity drugs. Evan paid a Calcutta local to hijack it back and business resumed as usual.

Shanghai peddlers reported their shipment had not arrived at the distribution point. Evan found it ten hours later in a warehouse across the street.

Beirut peddlers tripled the price of the puzzles and pocketed the difference. Evan learned they were still selling twice as many as anyone else and ignored it.

In Ottawa, a flannel impounded a peddler's stock of puzzles; but the MRB was silent. Evan thought of a time bomb that suddenly stops ticking.

London . . . Paris . . . As-trakhan . . . Lima . . . everywhere, cartons of puzzles arrived by unknown means—on schedule. Evan sweated with his army as it fumbled, groped—and finally put the puzzles into the outstretched hands of the people.

Time blurred, and three sleepless days passed before he reached for a problem and found none. He shoved a puzzle in his pocket and flew to the lodge. For forty-eight hours, he slept and dreamed of shifting patterns.

The world has changed.

The thought jumped into his mind as he flew low over Mankato LU on the way back to Chicago. He saw mobs boiling around the low, flat dormitories, enclosed by a perimeter of men in gray. Early sun splashed rainbows on a fog of cyto.

He watched a figure break through the perimeter and run into the open. Evan hesitated a moment, then went down, aiming at a level area ahead of the fugitive.

Something blotted out the sky above him. He looked up at a patrol plane carrying the Union label on its underbelly.

"PRIVATE CRAFT ARE FORBIDDEN!" boomed its speaker. "WITHDRAW IMMEDIATELY TO A DISTANCE OF TEN MILES!"

Evan watched the eight-inch cyto-spray nozzles swing toward him and withdrew.

So the rabbits are rioting. Something new. He searched the public channels for word of the Mankato incident. None, so they must be suppressing it. How many others?

He was nearing Chicago when the announcer broke into a drama to say that residents of living units were asked not to leave their units until further notice. The re-

quest, he added genially, would be enforced only if necessary.

They're free—as long as they obey orders. The velvet glove is slipping.

Evan landed two miles from the tavern and started walking. The streets seemed crowded; but silent. Odd. In one block he saw fourteen people seated on the curb, their eyes fixed on the plastic cubes.

In another block, he found a dead cube. Someone had solved his puzzle, then threw it away as a cripple might discard a crutch when he learned to walk.

He drew out his own puzzle, watched the particles swirl—and waited. Then it came, the stabbing headache, as usual. He shoved the puzzle back in his pocket.

He unlocked the door of his tavern and walked in. He sniffed the stale odor of the closed room and saw spare cases of puzzles stacked beside the bar. Nothing had changed.

"Ho Bairn."

Evan jerked around to see a tall, blue-eyed man leaning against the door with his hands in his pockets.

"Your eyes have a familiar cast." He tensed his muscles. "Do I know you?"

The man's lips stretched in an imitation smile. "You know me, Bairn. You marked me." He turned his head, and Evan saw the hairless pink scar tissue behind his right ear.

Blue Eyes! The Hood he'd laid out on the floor. "I'm square with your local."

"But not me, Bairn." He started to draw his hand from his pocket and Evan leaped . . .

Pink mist enveloped him. The sweet-fat taste of cyto bit deep in his throat and filled his lungs. He smashed into the wall, blinded.

He wiped his eyes and glared through the pink haze. "You're not allowed to use cyto!"

Blue-eyes laughed. "Bairn, where you been? We Hoods affiliated with the Union three days ago. I'm with MRB, and it's my pleasure to take you in. Let's go." He turned and walked stiff-legged out the door without looking back.

Clever Steven. If you can't beat 'em, hire 'em.

The taste of cyto was the taste of defeat. He seemed to feel the body cells breaking down, tearing apart as the gas began its slow work. He hurried after the blue-eyed man.

Evan was anesthetized the

moment he reached MRB headquarters in Ottawa. He was sick when he awoke, and he felt as though a dozen spiders had spun webs in his brain. But the breaking, tearing sensation was gone.

For two days, he lay in a locked and padded room and got his food through a door panel. Then Blue-eyes lounged in with a broad smile and waved a cyto-gun. "Move out, Bairn."

Evan padded barefoot into the corridor, the white gown striking just above his knees. As he walked through offices, people looked up from their desks, opened their eyes wide, then looked away.

The walk ended before a vast oaken desk with a uniformed man behind it.

"Well, Evan," said the man. "Sixteen years."

Sixteen years. Evan felt his heart beat faster. *Sixteen years since father disclaimed you; since you left me in the tunnel with a rib kicked through my lung.* "I could use sixteen more, Steven."

For a minute their eyes locked, then Steven lowered his eyes and lifted a cube from the desk. "Can you work this?"

"No. Can you?"

"I'm not trying." Steven threw the cube against the

wall and watched it bounce on the thick carpet. A green-haired girl with a secretary's badge jumped forward to pick it up and place it gently on the desk. Steven ignored it.

"But I've had analysts working since they appeared. Bright boys. One of them solved it two days ago." Steven held up a cube with a fixed pattern.

"So . . . ask him how he did it."

"I will. If I ever find him." He leaned back in his chair and studied Evan through lowered lids. Evan was conscious of his long legs sticking out beneath the gown.

"You don't know much that can help us, Evan. I probed you, naturally." His mouth twisted. "Smart. You aren't always smart."

His smile disappeared. "It wasn't smart to sell puzzles to the LUies. They're ours, body and soul. Did you think we'd watch quietly while they left the Movement?"

Evan shrugged.

"You're out of business, Evan. Charter revoked. Puzzles impounded—as fast as we can pry them out of their sweaty little hands. As president, you have twelve hours to submit a formal request

for Rehab. After that you're marked for kill. Unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"I'm in full control now. Emergency powers. Before I'm through there won't be a Loner left alive. But you can come in with me."

Evan remembered how Steven had once shared some money he'd found. Steven had decided how both shares would be spent. "Go to hell, Steven."

A muscle jumped in Steven's jaw. "Idiot! You can't compromise, can you? You're a black-or-white man, like that shambling relic you were so proud to call a father."

Anger squeezed Evan's throat but he kept his voice level. "Tell you one thing, Steven. You've compromised until there's nothing left. Your moral basis is gone, now that you've brought in the Hoods, and you're riding on naked power. You love it, sure. You're like Blue-eyes here—" he waved at the grinning man beside him "—vicious, sadistic, *sick!*"

"That's enough." Steven suddenly looked tired. "Go if you like. But when you walk out that door, you're just one more condemned Loner."

Evan walked out.

Nobody stopped him as he

padding through the offices. Outside, he stopped and took a deep breath. He felt free, like a fighter who's been told the rules have been suspended.

Twelve hours to . . . what? Rehab? He was a sprinter, not a plodder. He could stand death; but not grinding years of punitive labor. He decided they'd never take him alive—and he was free to learn what he'd been doing.

He watched a man walk by with a brief case, eyes front. His badge identified him as an out-of-town LUie traveling on business.

Too bad, LUie. You're just my size, and I need clothes.

Evan stayed a half-block behind him until they reached a park bordered by a manicured, shoulder-high hedge. Evan slipped through it and ran, his bare feet whipping the grass. The man was opening his mouth when Evan's fist smashed his jaw.

He dragged him behind the hedge, hit him again, and stripped him. The clothes were tight and the shoes pinched his feet, but he got them on.

Cards identified the LUie as a food accountant, second class, Milwaukee. And—luck! He had an aircar trip ticket.

He searched the brief case.

Inside a roll of papers showing cost comparisons of yeast nutrients in Australia and North America, he found a puzzle. Good! Steven would have trouble impounding them.

The man's eyes flickered, and Evan pinned his shoulders to the ground. "Where's your aircar?"

The man gasped. "Don't . . . don't . . . get away! You're marked!"

Evan started to raise his hand to his forehead, then checked himself. Silly to irritate it. It would be there, the man wouldn't lie—and it explained why they'd let him walk out of MRB. They'd marked him while he slept.

He wrapped his fingers around the man's throat and brought his face close. "*Where is your aircar?*"

The man rolled his eyes. "Lot . . . two blocks down. Please go away."

Evan drove his fist into the man's jaw. *Kill him?* He stood up and watched blood and saliva trail from the open mouth. Easy . . . jump on his throat and crush his windpipe. Then they couldn't trace the aircar.

It was time to be ruthless. Like Steven: this was his world. *But I'm not Steven.*

Then this is not your world.

True . . . that's why I'm changing it. He ripped up the short robe, tripled the strips, and bound the man's arms and legs. He gagged him, rolled the naked body under the hedge, and covered it with a spruce branch.

He brushed the light brown hair over his forehead to hide the mark and slipped through the hedge. He walked swiftly, head down.

Seven hours later he walked into the College.

The silence chilled him. The corridor was empty; the treadmill still. He found the turnstile lying on its side, bolts ripped from the base.

He sniffed. Cyto—faint, but easy to pick from the smell of underground mold. The cyto was long dead, but the lingering odor meant they'd been raided less than twenty-four hours ago. While he was locked in the padded room. *Steven probed this.*

He found the big girl's room and pushed open the door. His eyes fell on the enormous rumpled bed, then he saw the huge body beside it. She lay on her side and rested her head on her right arm. Dead.

And the flannel against the wall . . . he couldn't be alive with the back of his head

nearly touching his heels. *Qué mujer!*

Cyto hung like a blanket, but that hadn't stopped her. He counted three red-crust holes between her breasts; two in her throat. *Bullets now. Death guaranteed, no waiting.*

He bent to pick up a ball the size and color of an apple; squeezed it.

"What says the Indian?" asked the ball.

"What says—?" Ah, a message device, with a test question. He thought hard. "How?"

Nothing. But the answer would be one only he would know. The Indian at the lodge, naturally. "By the shores of Gitchie-goomie, by the —"

The ball clicked and Sari's voice sounded: "I'll be at the rocks. Hurry."

That was all. The ball grew warm, then hot. He dropped it and watched it turn to ashes besides the big girl's body.

The rocks. That was . . . let's see, straight west on the lake shore. He started running, then slowed to a walk as he remembered the mark. If he fell and bruised it . . . broke the protective coating . . . ugh!

Five minutes later, he walked into a ten-acre badland of shattered and tilted

concrete slabs; all that remained of a vibrator-bombed harbor. He had been threading through the maze an hour when he heard the hoarse whisper: "Here, Evan! Quickly, over here!"

She was hugging her knees, huddled beneath a peaked roof formed by two slabs. The white wrapper was torn, and a long white leg was bare to the waist. He watched the beginning of her slow smile, then her eyes flew wide. "Evan you're marked!"

He nodded. "The Hoods are in MRB now."

She frowned. "That means we'll have to move slowly. We can't risk taking it off until we get there."

"Where?"

"Our camp up north. Everybody's going there to wait until this is over."

"What?" He squeezed in beside her. "You mean we're planning to hole up and just . . . let things happen?"

She nodded.

"But we started this thing! The LUies are prisoners in their units. The Hoods are running loose spraying bullets. Cyto must be too slow—"

"No. They still use it. But only flannels and Hoods are given immunity."

Evan couldn't speak for a

minute. "The freaks from the College—"

"I hope . . . they won't suffer long. They were probably euthed."

Euthanasia was quick, at least. But that left the Loners . . . He saw Steven's logic. With LUies penned up and only flannels and Hoods getting immunity, Loners could be easily exterminated.

"This," he grated, "is a hell of a way to run a revolution. No plan to take over. No reform program. Just run and hide! I've done that long enough. Now I'll stay and fight with the others."

"Evan . . ." her hand was warm on his forearm and her eyes looked smokey in the shadow. "You have to stay alive—for me. This *is* the plan, it isn't revolution. It's evolution."

He stared at her. "Man will change?"

"*Is* changing. Remember the Loners in your motive banks? Now we can only wait."

"What will—?" He stopped, hearing the distant roar of an aircar. He peered out and saw it flying low over the beach a quarter-mile away, trailing pink fog. It reached the water and turned, crisscrossing the beach. *Saturation pattern.*

He leaned into the shelter. "They're soaking the area with cyto. It can't miss." He thought quickly. "Listen, do you have a communications setup—world wide?"

"Yes." Her fingers raced as she unfastened the wrapper, and he saw the silver gleam of wire running up her side and around her naked shoulder. She took a dime-sized subvocal mike from her armpit and held it out to him.

Evan shook his head. "You tell them. Have them spread the word for Loners to get out of the cities, avoid crowds, and don't bunch up. Tell them to head for rough country—timber if they can find any. Got it?"

She nodded, eyes wide.

"Good. I'll draw these boys away. When it's safe, slip out and meet me at the tavern."

Her nails dug into his forearm. "Evan, don't get killed! That's more important than . . . *anything!*"

He loosened her fingers, then he was running in a crouch through the concrete maze. He reached the open and pounded across it, awkward in the tight shoes. The sound of the aircar changed, and he looked back to see it roar toward him.

He reached the steps and went underground, slowing to let his eyes adapt to the darkness. Thirty feet down the steps ended. He could see black water a dozen feet below. The ceiling above him was cracked and decayed, held up by rusted reinforcing rods. It had collapsed further down and blocked the passage.

It hadn't changed in . . . eighteen years.

He heard their footsteps. Two of them, coming fast. The crevasse in which he and Steven had once hidden from a gang of juvenile hoods was smaller than he remembered, but he squeezed in.

He watched them pass, each with a gun in his right hand. "Hey! This thing is fl—!"

Evan pushed, one with each hand, and listened to their twin splashes in the water below. He jumped up, grasped a dangling rod, and pulled it down. The ceiling crumbled like wet sand, and Evan squatted with his arms over his forehead.

When the rumbling ceased, he walked to the edge and looked down. Debris filled the hole and water was gushing in. And the shout . . .

The voice had belonged to Blue-eyes, whom he'd last seen in Steven's office. *Must have*

found that LUie. He watched until water reached the step he stood on, then left.

The tavern looked peaceful. The wooden door sagged at the same angle; the glass window with the ancient lettering gave the same warped reflection.

But Evan crouched in a doorway across the street and waited until the panhandler looked his way. Then he signalled, *Is it safe?*

The old man made no response.

Can't see me, thought Evan. He took a step—then froze as the old man jumped up and threw his hat in the air. Evan squeezed back into the doorway as the man began hopping crazily in front of the tavern.

The door opened and a man in gray stepped out, raised a gun, and fired four times. The old beggar jerked and fell. He was dead when the last bullet brought a spurt of dust from the ragged gray overcoat.

The man in gray bent over the body. He tugged on something, then turned to shout into the tavern: "Come here! This old boy's wired for sou—!"

A blue flash blinded Evan and showered the street with bits of concrete and glass. When he looked up, the men

and the front of the tavern were gone.

Another blast smashed him against the door. Through shielding arms he watched the tavern roof rise a dozen feet in the air and collapse. Flames roared through the rubble.

So . . . the tavern was a trap. The old beggar had tried to warn him, then his self-destruction bomb had set off the tavern explosion.

I told Sari to meet me here.

But Sari had been in touch with the old beggar. Wouldn't he warn her too?

He waited until dark came, and with it a squad of flannels who began sifting the debris—but no Sari. That left only one possibility. The lodge.

Union patrols filled the air like vultures in a dry summer. Evan abandoned the stolen aircar on a Neue Deutschland farm.

Walking was hell. His feet swelled in the tight shoes and pain climbed his legs with every step.

His mark kept him off the roads by day. But on the third day, he covered it with flesh-colored paint and wondered why he'd never thought of it before. By afternoon it felt like a platoon of red ants doing close order drill, and he walked with clenched hands

in his pockets to keep himself from absent-mindedly scratching it.

He saw a few people, usually alone, and they seemed anxious to avoid him. Sari's warning had taken effect.

The lodge. It stuck in his mind as a symbol of peace. As the days passed in a walking daydream, it mingled with another symbol. Sari. Smoky eyes and long white limbs. Soft pine smell. Wind over cool water.

His head ached and he lost track of time.

One morning, he felt something dragging on his shoulder. He looked down and saw an ancient rifle in his hand. He lifted it, sighted and knocked a pine cone out of a tree. He couldn't remember firing a gun before.

That afternoon, he found a man who lay on the ground like a pat of warm butter and gurgled. A cyto victim, long past saving.

He raised the gun and shot him between two milky hollows where the eyes had been. He saw the man had big feet. Maybe . . .

He pulled off his shoes, hissing as blood flowed into his purple feet. Then he pulled off the dead man's shoes; vomited as the spongy bone gave beneath his hands. The shoes fit.

Another time, he heard a staccato burst of gunfire, then cheering. He watched from the edge of the woods as ten men in gray flannels were pushed out, tied, and stood against the wall of an LU. The staccato burst came again and the men fell. A crowd cheered. He watched ten more flannels pushed forward, and walked away, feeling sick.

Hardwoods gave way to pine and birch as he neared the lodge. He walked around a small ceramics LU; saw men and women at work at the long tunnel kilns. Finished liners for aircar jet tubes overflowed the freight yard. There had been no revolt here; but the unshipped goods meant that the system had broken down.

Beyond the LU, he found a pyramid of puzzles twelve feet high, still alive. Impounded. It explained why the LU was at peace, and the LUies still worked.

Evan took a puzzle from the pile and walked on, looking at it. "A crutch. A crutch is a tool." Strange croaking voice in the silent forest. *Mine, I've been too long alone.*

Pain squeezed his brain. He shoved the puzzle in his pocket and concentrated on keeping himself erect, one foot before the other. It was getting

harder to do—but he couldn't be far from the lodge. It had to be close now.

Suddenly the strength went out of his legs. He remembered to shield his forehead just before he fell . . .

Consciousness returned with the taste of lukewarm water in his mouth. He swallowed and opened his eyes; looked at a face covered by an inch-long gray beard.

The man took the canteen from his lips and leaned back on his heels. "Can you sit?"

Evan nodded and raised himself.

"Here." The man held out a chunk of cooked meat.

Evan took the meat and sank his teeth into it, remembering that he had forgotten to eat for . . . how many days?

He noticed smears of dried clay on the man's LUie blue uniform; saw the thick, rough hands. "You from that ceramics LU?"

"Was. I have better things to do now." The man dropped his eyes to the bulge in Evan's pocket. "I've been wondering . . . why do you keep yours?"

"This?" Evan pulled out his swirling puzzle.

"Oh! I thought . . . driven to forget rest and food . . . you must have found your solution."

"I've tried! But my head—" Evan raised his hand.

The old man nodded. "The old emotions fight the new, for a time. Perhaps when you're no longer driven . . ."

"Did you have headaches?"

"I was dead inside. There was nothing to fight."

Evan could feel the man's suppressed urgency. "But you've changed."

"Yes." The man's eyes seemed to catch fire. "Now I look for a glaze that sparkles like a galaxy at midnight, a vase that sends a sweet note through the soul when you tap it with a fingertip, so strong you can stand on a sheet as thick as a lily petal."

He stood up suddenly and shrugged a pack onto his shoulders. "Now I'm searching for a clay that shapes on the wheel like a fog of white velvet. I wish you luck in *your* search." He picked up his trowel and moved away.

"Wait!" Evan tried to get to his feet, then lay back. "How do you know this thing exists?"

The old man turned and frowned. "It doesn't. But it will. I *saw* it." He settled the pack on his back and walked away.

Evan got to his feet; swayed as the blackness threatened to descend again.

When he opened his eyes, the man was gone.

It will exist, the potter said.

He held up the puzzle. *It can be solved*, Sari said, *if you know the solution.*

If every solution was different, the only way he could solve it was to learn how he *would* solve it in the future.

Sari solved it. Did she know the future? Well, she was (*is, for Lord's sake!*) the most annoyingly confident person he'd ever met—except for the last time at the rocks.

He started walking, feeling new strength in his legs. Sari would have the answers when he got to the lodge.

Evan rose on his elbows and looked at the lodge.

Five hours, and nothing had moved; now it was dark under the trees. He stood up and walked forward, stepping carefully on the wooden porch and avoiding the three-headed dog. It could be bombed; the door, too. He pried a window open with a long board and vaulted inside the game room.

"Don't turn on the light."

He froze. Sari's voice, but weak and distorted. His eyes probed the gloom. "Sari? How long have you been here?"

"Four days. Evan . . . don't come any closer. I've got a touch of cyto."

The room felt cold.
"When?"

"When they raided the College. I meant to tell you..."

Evan took a step backward, struck a chair, and lowered himself into it. *So long ago.*

In the gloom she was a lighter shadow pillowed in blackness. He forced his eyes away; remembering how she'd looked before, lithe and white.

"You haven't long." Sickness lay in his stomach like a sac of bile, and he tasted the bitterness. "*Why didn't you kill yourself?*"

"I will, Evan... or you can. But this small death is nothing. I had to be with you when it happened. You're my... link."

"Link?"

"I... will explain, Evan. But this... stuff. I can't find the words I want."

Aphasia. The gas had reached her brain and was beginning to dissolve abstract speech centers. "I'll help, if you want to talk. But don't hurt yourself."

"No pain. Nerve cells go first." There was a long silence, and he could hear fish splashing in the lake. Then her voice came again, stronger. "This began... about forty years ago. Loners weren't the only ones who lived outside

the Movement. There were... oh! people who play with all things... science... art...!"

"Dilettantes?"

"Yes. They enjoyed thinking, and that was... dangerous inside the Movement."

Her voice stopped suddenly, and Evan's palms grew slick during the long silence. He wondered if she were dead—but he didn't want to find out.

Then she talked again—in a tumbling torrent that made Evan's mind race to keep up. *Time-sense*, he thought, *playing tricks on her.* Gradually, he made sense of her words.

One of the dilettantes had been a nucleic transfer freak who could neither hear nor speak. But his hands held a genius for symbolizing abstractions. He used his genius—as dilettantes often did—to create amusing games for the others. The Gamesman.

Once he created a new art form. It was a mobile with pieces designed to flow in symbolic patterns as the player moved his fingers. He called it *Destiny*.

He showed it to a woman who dabbled in music. As she was toying with it, she felt as though a hand had reached into her mind and twisted her thoughts. The particles froze and... she saw her destiny.

"*Saw it?*" asked Evan.

"Saw . . . perceived . . . felt. She had no words. She . . . was aware of strange, beautiful music just beyond her ears, as far beyond anything she knew as a clarinet is beyond a hollow reed. She couldn't play the music. She didn't have the instruments. Nor the concepts. But she knew what to work for."

"That seems . . ." Evan shrugged, "a small thing."

"Oh, no! Think of the man who made the first wheel seeing a modern aircar. He couldn't build one—no tools, parts, or fuel. But he would know what to work for. Or . . . think of the first man to say 'stone' without pointing to it, sensing the cadence and feeling in *Ode to a Grecian Urn*. He can't compose it . . . doesn't have the words . . . but he knows what he can do to help. Think of . . . oh! How could I explain blue to a blind man? To know destiny is the difference between piling stones at random and working from a model. It's purpose; not power."

"Yes, I see that."

She went on, more slowly now.

The Gamesman took the puzzle apart, then put it together again. It froze in a new pattern, and the Gamesman

saw destiny. One by one, the others saw it.

"The group," she said, "might have just . . . waited for the world to catch up. They were not . . . aggressive people. Except for one man. He had been a Loner, and he wanted to give destiny to all people. That was your father."

Evan sat up straight. Then, remembering the man, discovered that he wasn't surprised. "A big job."

"A long one. He started more than thirty years ago. First he had to force the LUies out of their habit-patterns and start them thinking again. Or they'd never be able to use the puzzles the Gamesman was making."

Evan remembered the yellowed poster his father had left him. "Were the puzzles so important?"

"They formed . . . the patterns of destiny."

"All different?"

"Because no two people have the same destiny. They stimulated the comprehension, but they are . . . a map you can't understand until you're ready to see the territory."

The LUies weren't ready, his father found. And the Union, understanding only that here was a threat to the *status quo*, condemned the

Gamesman. His father escaped to the far north. A few dilettantes who shared his aim went with him. Later, they rescued the Gamesman and managed to make the MRB believe he was dead.

After 14 years, they returned to try again—this time with a plan. The nucleic transfer freaks, the largest group outside the Movement, were organized into a world-wide underground. They provided communications channels, concealment—and later distributed the puzzles.

The group needed a way to enlarge their organization with LUies who might be ready—so the hobby clubs were born.

"We collected money from businessmen and got them to manufacture puzzles, giving the impression we were working for a return to the old days when business was on top. Then we needed a front man . . ."

She was silent again, and Evan thought: *Here's where I come in.*

"You were a mistake, Evan—though the mistake was made before you were born. Your father wanted to learn if destiny could be inherited, so you and Steven were conceived."

"You mean Steven—?" *Oh, no!*

"Is your brother, yes. But neither of you inherited it, as your father learned when he found you fourteen years later. And you were so hostile to each other that he knew you could never work together—so he split you up. Money to one, and the remains of the business to the other—with his name thrown in for consolation."

"Why was he sent to Rehab?"

"That was . . . not part of our plan. He was . . . how does it go? Framed. By Steven."

Evan's hands gripped the chair arm. *If I could hold his throat . . .*

"We could have released him, but he said we were too near jump-off to risk exposure. You could take his place."

"His place?"

"In the campaign, the last step. But the world was hostile to Loners, and we wanted to make sure you'd live until we needed you. So the Gamesman watched you, disguised as a panhandler."

The Gamesman . . . the panhandler. *All those years, and he died at the end.* Destiny had strange results.

"But you did too well in your business, and it began

to look like you wouldn't be desperate enough to accept our kind of offer. So we . . . I had our business patrons put pressure on your clients to withdraw."

"You did that?" He felt the beginning of anger, then it subsided. Maybe she'd been doing him a favor. "This . . . destiny. Everyone will have it now?"

"No. The blood-drinkers, the haters . . . they're too full of primitive emotions to have any room for it. Some will lose their hates. Those who can't are extinct, though the world will still be theirs for a decade, maybe two—while they grope toward their graves."

Goodbye, Steven. Then, aloud: "How can it last? You said it can't be inherited."

"No. . . . It can be. It wasn't passed on to you and Steven because it can only be transmitted by women. Like hemophilia. I am the only adult of the second generation so far. My mother . . . was the first woman to see destiny."

So women would occupy a favored place in the new world. *Carriers of destiny.* Evan found he didn't object.

"It seems to grow stronger with each generation. I've had it since I was born, and I see . . . things more clearly than the others."

"What do you see?"

"I . . . well, it isn't visual. As though you dream of an event that occurs in a strange city. So real you're sure you won't die until you reach that city. For me there are many such events . . . stretching on and on. It fills me up inside and leaves room for nothing else. The last . . . is something completely beyond my understanding. I . . . or someone with whom I am linked . . . works in a strange place . . . an odd sun in the sky, helping . . . teaching some creatures I can't describe."

"It's hard to imagine this suddenly—" he snapped his fingers, "—popping into existence with no warning."

"Your father thought people *could* have done it for centuries. *Déjà vu*, you know . . . thinking you've been someplace before. He said you actually foresaw, then forgot."

He leaned forward. "Your immediate future—you see that?"

"It blurs. The Gamesman thought I *could* see it, but by observing it, I changed it; then I saw the change, and it changed again . . . you see? The old Heisenberg principle. I can't foresee my death, for example, but I know . . . in just a few minutes . . ."

"Wait!" He felt an urge to keep her talking as though it would keep her living. "You said we were linked. What does it mean?"

The silence that followed was the longest, and when she spoke again her voice sounded like dry, rustling leaves. "Remember . . . you saw my puzzle and said it looked . . . almost right? It meant . . . somewhere in the future our destinies converge. Perhaps a woman can't achieve her destiny without a man. Anyway, I felt . . . I had to be with you . . ."

Evan stood up and walked to the window. Did that mean she wouldn't die? But that was ridiculous. Destiny didn't stop the bullets that ripped into the Gamesman; it wouldn't stop cyto. "These headaches I've been having—do they mean I'm not ready?"

There was no answer.

"Sari?"

He turned. Night had ended; light had sifted through the window and brushed away the shadows. He could see . . . too well. He squeezed his eyes shut and left the room.

Outside the lodge, he stopped beside the water and looked at the puzzle in his hand. The bright fragments danced gaily, taunting. He

threw it, watched it splash far out in the lake, and his eyes filled with tears.

"Damn destiny," he mumbled.

Climb a mountain and what do you see? A screaming chasm, sans Sari . . . sans purpose. Nothing mattered. The tight knot of hate broke and flowed into contempt for Steven, then pity, then compassion. Finally, like water spilled on sand, emotion ended.

Emptiness.

Suddenly, the feeling in his mind was like rotten cloth tearing under water; as though he came out of a dark cave into sunlight.

He was no longer on the dock. He stood before a red brick factory LU and people streamed out. Machines, quickly made from hundred-year-old plans, rolled in . . . An interval of blackness, then he watched tons of stored cyto-gas exposed to open air by rubber-suited men . . . Another break, and he stood in a vast hall and spoke to an assembly of preoccupied men and women . . . He climbed a ladder on a tall, silver ship and felt exultant . . .

Something else shimmered in the distance. *A hot blue sun beat down on his shoulders. He stood before a glassy hut*

and spoke to three tall beings whose lacquered surface returned the sun in blue-black highlights. Their faceted eyes were unreadable, but he sensed their feeling: trust, reverence.

He stood once more on the dock, and the morning breeze was a cool feather brushing his cheek. *That was—that will be me; but more than me.*

He knelt on the dock and pressed his hand to his eyes, straining to bring the last vision again into focus.

The me was we. The woman and himself had mingled as two chemicals blend in solution. His thought searched out the fragments; drew them slowly back through centuries of couplings, as one might run a movie in reverse, a frame at a time.

Then the ego split like a dividing cell. One became himself; the other was Sari. He glimpsed a tall, gaunt man kneeling on a dock, and one journey ended.

But the ego that was Sari went on. It watched a haggard man rise and walk to a window. The body was useless, the cells broken—but each nucleus lived, and each nucleus had a memory.

They remembered long firm thighs, slim fingers, breasts

resilient to a touch, eyes that could cloud with concern like drifting smoke. Energy poured into the cells and stirred the memories. They began to build . . .

Evan rose from his knees. His muscles ached and his bones cracked. He looked up at the sun, past zenith and leaning into the west. *What happened to the time?*

His mind was chaos, strewn with memories like a beach after a hurricane.

"Evan?"

He whirled. She stood at the door, blinking in the light, and he thought of a newly-awakened kitten. Evan stood still as she swayed toward him, watching the wind fluff a wisp of midnight hair across her face, hardly noticing that the wrapper was gone. *She had died, hadn't she?*

"Evan . . ." She grasped his arm and looked up into his face. "You found it! Without the puzzle . . . and you found something new!"

He remembered, then, the long journey back from the blue sun, but . . . "Out there, we were mingled, you and I. How did that happen?"

"Evan," her arm slid around his waist and her head rested on his shoulder. "I told you we were linked. That was our descendant."

THE END

TORO!

By
MACK
REYNOLDS

Ah, had you been in the arena that day, you would have seen the most amazing sights . . . and afterwards, ah, what may not happen afterwards?

WWIERN was having difficulty with his Udd. It was all he could do to keep life within it and against all of his natural tendencies to do so. Prolonging the existence of a living creature when it was in extreme pain was against every civilized instinct within him but Wwiern was in no position to allow the Udd relief and escape from life's ills for at least another hour. An hour, he told himself apologetically, wasn't too much to ask of an Udd who had lived his life in comfort and security under the guidance of Wwiern's superior intellect.

The green planet was coming up rapidly, more so that the small space craft's pilot

would have preferred. It took considerable concentration on Wwiern's part to activate his host's tenacles so that they reached out and dropped the telescopic wing lever.

He would be airborne now, in moments.

Another tenacle wearily touched refrigeration unit controls.

Wwiern, with exhausting exertion, brought spark to the Udd's eyes to the point where he could concentrate again on the volume before him. He checked quickly the material available on the planet beneath. Little was known he realized with the equivalent of a groan. The oxygen content, unimportant to him but defi-

nately so to his Udd; the gravity, heavy but not impossible; the vegetation, it should support life as he knew it, although his own nourishment was assimilated from the body of the host he occupied and the problem was once removed from him.

Information on animal life was practically non-existent. Intelligent life? The last time the Galactic League had checked the planet there had been signs of development of a two-legged mammal somewhat similar to the Kroos of Diocletian Two. It had reached the point of using sharpened stones for weapons and tools. There seemed possibilities that such might be utilized as a host, although he had no idea of its size and whether or not it would fit the confines of his tiny space craft.

But that would have to wait.

The atmosphere was beginning to cushion him. The dulling eyes of the Udd checked dials, meters, flickering warning lights. Wwiern forced a tenacle to activate the refrigeration units still more, friction was heating the ship dangerously.

It became a question now of setting down before all signs of life were gone from the Udd. The one situation aggra-

vated the other. Increased deceleration, of little effect on Wwiern, in view of the almost liquid nature of his physical body, accelerated the dying process of the Udd. But there was nothing for it.

At the last split second before touching down, Wwiern spotted animal life below in a large field. With every faculty available to him, with every iota of psychic strength at his control, he forced the Udd to touch here, there, to press this, release that. They slid into a landing, an all but perfect landing, and the Udd was dead.

For a long moment Wwiern, the symbiont, held inactivity in the memory of the long years of faithful service the Udd had given him and he had returned. A symbiotic relationship must not be one of master and slave, and on the planet of his birth most certainly was not.

But there was danger in remaining in the Udd following its death. He began, then, to ease his way from its brain and out of its body using the various nasal passages in the creature's abdominal region.

Once free, and the process took several minutes, he began to take stock of his situation. His physical powers,

without his symbiotic host, were negligible but there were two or three controls built into his craft for just such emergencies. He was able to activate the scanner and to size up the grove in which his craft had landed. To one side were various tall woody plants, all about him, vegetation much shorter. And now he could make out one of the animal life forms which had attracted him. It was a gigantic, four-legged beast, obviously herbivorous. It was a potential host, although not ideal.

Wwiern was at a loss on how to proceed. The yellow sun above, he knew, would destroy him in moments were he to expose himself to it without the protesting bulk of a host and he had no idea of how to cross the distance from ship to beast.

The problem was solved by the animal itself. The gigantic black creature, possibly half again as large as the space craft, had been pawing the ground, snorting, obviously upset by the presence of the metallic strangeness which had dropped from the skies. Now suddenly it exploded into movement and thundered down upon the intruder.

Wwiern felt the impact as a blow, felt his craft rupture,

was thrown back and into a corner of the control room. He could feel, although his senses were such as usually to be focused through those of another, the impact of additional charges, of continued blows and the noises of the angry colossus.

But at least the attack served to solve the problem immediately before him. Satisfied, at last, that the enemy was *hors de combat*, the black monster stood above the wreckage, his head lowered belligerently, and within a few inches of the symbiont.

Wwiern gathered his forces, projecting quieting telepathic commands which he could only hope might be somewhat effective on this new life form, and then touched exploringly the creature's snout. The hypnosis was more effective than he had even hoped and he was able to flow into the beast's body with little more effort than would have been necessary with the Udd.

He explored rapidly the animal's structure, settling finally in the area where spine and skull met, sending tendrils out to control senses and muscles.

As he had decided from the first view, the intelligence quotient of his new host was negligible. Within a few min-

utes he had established dominance of the beast's functions and began practicing locomotion and sensory influence.

The space craft, he decided, was a complete loss. The very best that he could hope for would be to find a more suitable host, one possessing limbs capable of delicate work, and build signal equipment that could reach out into space and request rescue.

There was equipment in the space craft, how badly damaged he didn't know, that he would undoubtedly need for such a signaling device. He activated his host and with its horns pushed the battered ship to the shade of the tall woody vegetation and then did his best to disguise it with bushes, leaves and fallen branches. The task took time in view of the clumsiness of his animal, but it might be of importance.

His immediate job, aside from keeping his host fed and watered, was to find an animal form with hands such as were possessed by the Kroons of Diocletian Two, or with tentacles such as those of the Udd. That two-legged life form mentioned in the manual—if only it had survived.

Its survival was brought home to him in brief order.

He could hear a galloping of hoofs, some animal shouting, and over the hill swept two beasts which at first he took to be as strange as any the galaxy offered. It took moments for him to control the terror within his host and prevent him from dashing off.

A noose flashed out from one of the two newcomers and settled over his host's head and was quickly drawn. Another flicked out from the second of the two creatures and his black beast was held tight. And it was not until then that Wwiern understood that the newcomers were not indeed two animals, but four. Here then was a situation somewhat similar to his own symbiotic existence.

The controlling life form slipped from the back of its four-legged beast of burden and approached along the rope it had earlier thrown.

Still fighting the belligerent fear of the animal in his power, Wwiern had little time to more than realize that this two-legged creature must be the intelligent life form the Galactic League explorers had mentioned. It had evidently developed considerably.

Additional proof of that was forthcoming in moments when a vehicle, four wheeled and stinking of an internal

combustion engine, surmounted the hill in its turn and disgorged another trio of the two-legged intelligent life forms.

It took possibly five minutes for Wwiern and his host to be induced and forced into the back compartment of the vehicle, a task helped considerably when Wwiern discovered what the newcomers were about. It disrupted his plans not at all to be thus brought in more easy contact with the life form which was obviously most suited for him in a symbiotic relationship.

There was going to have to be some means of communication established, but that could wait. It was quite possible for him to occupy his position in a host without its knowledge and from that vantage point assimilate its means of communication and even more remote customs—although that would take time.

The ride from grove to the settlement of the two-legs was made the easier for his four-legged beast by Wwiern's relaxing presence. He did his best to sooth its outraged instincts, to loosen its muscles the better to absorb the bouncing of the poorly defined road.

The arrival at their destination was confusing even to

Wwiern; there was too much to see, too much to assimilate. He had confused pictures of a large, two-legs settlement, of tall buildings, and obvious indications of a rather advanced culture. How advanced, of course, he had no way of knowing until there would be opportunity for more extensive observation.

Thus far he'd had no opportunity to come close enough to one of the two-legs to change hosts. He wondered if the animals of this world, intelligent and otherwise, slept, as did the Udd. If so, transfer would be simple.

He found himself, in the four-legged beast, housed in a small, stall-like compartment, food, in the way of dried vegetation, before them, and water to one side. To the best of his ability he calmed the animal whose brain he occupied and urged it to consume the nourishment offered.

It occurred to him suddenly that the two-legs might be carnivorous and, if so, that possibly his host was slated for death and to make food for the others.

The idea revolted him but he was able to understand it. Intelligent life developed on the various planets throughout the Galactic League from a variety of backgrounds.

Carnivora had on more than one occasion reached true civilization, although, of course, long before its achieving they had found substitutes for their meat craving. Possibly the two-legs of this planet were in the transition period, not having as yet been able to emancipate themselves from depending upon the flesh of their fellow life forms.

Still without the opportunity to switch hosts, Wwiern spent a prolonged period in the stall, unable to measure its extent although there were periods of light and dark. He directed the animal's assimilation of food and drink and took the opportunity to further study the workings of its system. It was, he decided, a fairly young animal although fully adult and in excellent physical condition. He had never before occupied a host so muscularly perfect and decided that it must be at the prime of its life expectancy.

Eventually doors were opened, a passage exposed.

His four-legged beast without need to be prompted by Wwiern trotted down the passage toward the light and freedom that indicated itself at passage end.

Suddenly, just as they emerged into the light, sear-

ing pain flooded out from the beast's shoulder. The unexpectedness of it blinded Wwiern, terrified his host, who broke into a hysterical gallop, kicking his legs up behind him.

It took a shocked moment for the symbiont to realize that someone, or something, had embedded a short metal-tipped dart into his host's shoulder. He tried to regain the control he had lost when the pain had hit, but it took long moments to achieve mastery once more.

Before them a two-legs, one of the intelligent life forms, richly clothed in startling colors, was waving a large red cape. Still swept with pain and anger, the four-legged host Wwiern dominated sped after the darting two-leg, almost catching him before Wwiern brought it back under control.

He had narrowly averted, Wwiern believed, a horrible tragedy. Undoubtedly, the two-legs had not known of the accident which had hurt and terrified the unintelligent beast. In trying to guide it, two-legs had been unaware that the beast might well have injured him.

In control again, Wwiern trotted his host back to the center of the area in which he

found himself and took stock of the new situation.

He seemed to be centered in a large arena, hemmed in by wooden walls. To his surprise, he found himself confronting literally thousands of this planet's intelligent life forms. Thousands. They sat in rows, tier upon tier of them, beyond the wooden barrier which surrounded the arena, and were shouting and calling — obviously some form of communication.

Most were packed tightly in their seats but centering was one box that stood out in prominence and contained but a few of the spectators. One, in particular seemed the focus of their attention. Crowned with blonde hair, and obviously held in esteem — Wwiern knew instinctively she was a female—she seemed to hold distinction. Wwiern had no time to consider this further.

Another of the colorfully clad two-legs had darted out, cape in hand, and was waving it toward Wwiern's host and calling *Toro, Huh, Toro!*

Wwiern failed to understand and, in his puzzlement, allowed the animal again to escape from his domination. It burst suddenly into speed and dashed for the two-legs who side-stepped neatly, to Wweirn's relief. The beast

swirled again to try at the two-legs but now Wwiern had him in hand. He trotted his host back to the arena center, considered again the various possibilities of what was developing.

Obviously, this was not what he had first thought, a simple attempt to slaughter the animal for the sake of food. One could almost believe a festival of some sort to be proceeding. The colorful clothing of the two or three men in the ring contrasted sharply with the drabness of that worn by the others.

He held tight control of his host, refusing to let it charge again although the irritating capes continued to wave and the two-legs came provocatively nearer.

A blast of what Wwiern decided must be a crude sort of musical instrument split the air and the capes retired. From a far door appeared two two-legs mounted upon four-legged ones, similar to the arrangement under which Wwiern's host had been captured in the grove. They bore long staves tipped by metal and seemed to wear metal covering on their legs.

They approached carefully and a hush descended over the multitude in the stands.

It occurred to Wwiern at this point that possibly the host in which he had taken refuge was a criminal and had come to this to be executed. But surely in such a case there would hardly be the thousands of spectators. His own race resorted sometimes, in extreme situation, to execution but certainly it was in sorrow it was performed, not in the trappings of festival.

He was shocked from his musings by his beast's sudden lunge toward one of the newcomers. He tried to assume immediate control but not before the two-leg, mounted on his steed, had leaned heavily on his metal tipped staff inserting it deeply into the muscle of Wwiern's host, into the powerful muscle of the back.

Once again agonizing pain swept over Wweirn and he felt again and again the stabbing probing of the weapon. Of a sudden there were swirling capes and then more probes and the beast in which Wwiern resided was plunging and rearing in an attempt to get to his tormentors.

It was long moments before Wwiern found himself again in domination of the animal and now he realized the position in which he stood and that of his beast.

The two-legs in the stands were screaming their excitement and their bloodlust, the blonde-headed one, the guest of the afternoon, was clapping her hands, her eyes sparkling in excitement.

He realized the position in which he and his host stood. They were being sacrificed to provide a spectacle to satisfy bloodlust and to thrill with their deaths.

For a thousand millennia the race of which Wwiern was a member had not killed in anger or in sport and seldom at all. In all his life, he himself had never killed or even remotely considered the harming of a fellow life form. This was new and beyond belief.

But deep within him the stirring of anger was there. Anger and the demand for self-defense, for as long as he occupied this host his instincts were all to protect it. He remembered now that it was with his aid the creature had been easily captured in the fields, he himself had pacified it when it had wished to escape from its two-legs hunters.

The musical instruments had blared again and the arena was now empty.

But only momentarily. Advancing toward them, two barbed sticks in hand, was one

of the colorfully dressed two-legs, arrogance and confidence in his tread.

And cruel death in his face.

The crowd screamed its pleasure.

Wwiern waited for developments. Waiting to see what came next in this spectacle of pain and hate. He knew one thing, if possible he was not going to allow his host to suffer further wounds.

The beast was growing restless, wishing to charge. It pawed the ground nervously.

Huh, Toro! the two-legs called disdainfully.

Wwiern waited for the two-legs to approach closer. Suddenly it began to run toward them in a quarter-circle, barbs extended.

The symbiont allowed his host to break into a run in return and two-legs and four approached a collision point. And now Wwiern could see the other's plan. He expected to place the darts and twirl away to retreat safely to the wooden wall which surrounded the ring.

For a moment the brightly clad two-legs was up on his toes, barbs held gracefully high, and then Wwiern had tossed the sharp horn of his beast to the left, embedding one deep into the other's abdominal cavity. Even as the

horn sank to its full depth he could see the look of shocked amazement which preceeded pain in the face of his enemy.

There were shouts and calls from all directions and he tossed his host's head, throwing the antagonist to one side in the movement.

The animal's instincts over which he had to hold tight rein, cried to be allowed to pursue the fallen two-legs, to gore him again and again, to trample and toss, and almost Wwiern was able to lose himself in the primitive creature's bloodlust. Almost, but not quite. Wwiern held him firm. A clear head was needed now.

The others were coming, waving their capes and attempting to rescue their comrade. Wwiern charged.

Two he gored, ignoring the flapping capes on which they depended. One he knocked down and trampled.

Four writhing figures, three of them streaming blood, marked the sand of the arena when he trotted back to its center to resume his position.

The cries from the stands had, to his surprise, changed little. The bloodlust was still there. Shockingly, the fact that the blood spilt had been that of the two-legs rather

than his host had not deterred them.

He realized then that the multitudes had come for that very purpose—to see their own race risked as well as to witness the death of a more lowly life form.

He had expected to allow the fallen wounded to be taken away for treatment but now the full realization of the depravity of this life form brought him to bitter action again. A thousand millennia of civilization dropped away and he became truly a part of the beast he occupied.

He thundered forward, not knowing whether or not this was possible, whether his animal host, beautiful specimen though it was, was capable of the exertion he demanded of it. It was. The wooden barrier he cleared, landing behind it in a confusion of shouting, horrified spectators.

He charged desperately, tossing and goring, tramping indiscriminately. But this was not his goal, his overpowering rage encompassed the thousands above him. He sped about the enclosure searching for a method to ascend the wall into the stands.

Here! Here it was. A stand built for an observer who has stood with some lensed device

in his hands, some type of photography, Wwiern decided. The stand was all he needed.

Front feet, a mighty stretching, punishing bound and his legs were over the stone balustrade above. He scrambled mightily, using muscles for a task never remotely contemplated by his host—and then was in the packed seats.

They faced him not a moment, the shouting, screaming, terrified multitudes. He plowed through them as they turned to run, tossed and gored, trampled and killed in his fury of contempt and revenge.

When he stopped, the fury was still within him but they were gone. Through small doors, sometimes over the wall, back into the arena, they had flowed to escape him.

He stood alone except for the dead and the wounded too badly hurt to escape.

Not quite. At his feet lay stretched the blonde-haired one, the guest, he had decided, of the honored two-legs. A female of the species, undoubtedly a beauty among the race.

From the wall there was a loud report and he felt a stunning blow strike the side of his host. He glared up at the source of the sound. A two-legs stood at the wall's top, a

smoking tube in hand. An advanced weapon throwing a projectile by chemical explosion, Wwiern realized—his host's time was limited.

He looked down again at the blonde-haired one. He had not gored nor trampled her. She was untouched but unconscious, evidently in a faint from terror. In view of the fact that she breathed still, he assumed she would recover in time.

The loud report came again, and the blow all but forced him to his knees.

Wwiern had little time. He extended the animal's snout to within inches of the fallen fe-

male. The blast came again and the animal sank to its knees in agony and even as it did, Wwiern began to leave its body. Slowly he oozed from his dying four-legged host and toward the two-legs. He knew that from the distance involved none of the other two-legs would observe. The process would take only moments.

And if they thought he had caused them damage in the four-legged host, wait until he was in control of this blonde, two-legs female. One way or the other he would show them what trouble really was!

THE END

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THE BLACKBIRD

By JACK SHARKEY

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

Mix a strange Oriental, a prissy New England town, a series of deaths, a namby-pamby lawyer, and—a surprise witness! You have the weirdest cock-eyedest trial in the history of East Anchorville, or anywhere else!

THE Turk, true to traditions established by writers of Arabian adventure stories, was a giant. The villagers of East Anchorville—

named from its geographic relation to the larger town of Anchorville—were sure from the moment he'd first appeared in town that no good would

come of it. No one would admit to being actually afraid of him, but everyone was of the mind that caution was the prime consideration when dealing with him. So it was only natural that, when the horrors began, all minds should arrow like iron filings to the magnet of the Turk's mysterious nature.

The horrors began in the autumn, when the dry leaves clogged the irrigation ditches of the hinterlands, and cold gray dust sifted underfoot on the nubbly dirt roads about the town, and nightfall was an occurrence to be watched from inside one's home, with door bolted and fireplace glowing with burning logs.

Harriet Cord, the belle of the village (and bane of the womenfolk) had gone out for a buggy-ride with Marvin Sply, son of the late village blacksmith, toward sundown. Old folks in the town could be seen to purse their lips and cluck their tongues as the couple clattered out of town on Marvin's buckboard, an heirloom from his father, one hand on the horse's reins and the other quite definitely on Harriet.

Two hours later, Marvin had come back into town alone, his eyes wild, clothing awry, and lips spouting a

dreadful tale. The rattle of the buckboard entering the main street with the horse at full frantic gallop had brought out a curious crowd, including the town sheriff, who, on hearing Marvin's hysterical tale, had turned at once into Grogan's Saloon to round up some help, and was seen no more that night.

Villagers, men and women alike, had gotten aboard wagons, horses, and into the few automobiles the town boasted, and taken off for the scene of the crime, for such they were already convinced it was.

It was a terrible sight that met their eyes.

Harriet lay by the side of the road, stone cold dead, her face forever frozen into a bewildered sneer. There was not a mark upon the body, but clutched in the left hand they found a single black feather, large and shiny . . .

The coroner's verdict was, "Death of an unknown and mysterious nature, at the hands of person or persons unknown."

Suspicion immediately fastened upon the Turk.

His landlady, who "ran a respectable place," was of a mind to put him out at once. Mrs. Balsam didn't want "no truck with mon-

sters" in her boarding house. But she somehow felt that walking up the three flights to his attic room alone was not the easiest of tasks, and could find no one to accompany her upstairs—her husband suddenly decided to mow the lawn although the grass was yellowed and sere, and "didn't ask to have that fellow room there in the first place"—so she thought she'd bide her time and wait.

Thelma Bracy, her next-door neighbor, was of the opinion that Mrs. Balsam should dope his food and call the police to take him, and it was then for the first time that the odd fact came to light that the Turk had never taken a meal in Mrs. Balsam's establishment, though dinner and supper were included with the room rates. Within an hour after Thelma heard this bit of information, the word was out all over town, and the even more amazing fact came to light that no person in the town had *ever* seen the Turk take a meal, anywhere.

The sheriff (who had eventually arrested Marvin Sply for want of any other suspects) was informed of this turn of events at once. Or, rather, as soon as he was located, in Grogan's saloon.

And he informed Mrs. Balsam that the best thing to do under the "circumstances"—the Turk was seven feet tall and about 250 pounds—was to wait and watch.

Marvin, when he awoke the next morning in his cell at the East Anchorville jail, had demanded that he be let out at once, denying any knowledge of the means or motive of Harriet's death. His story was that they'd taken a stroll across a field, and it had grown too dark for Harriet to navigate the field back to the buckboard without turning a well-turned ankle, so Marvin had cut across to the other side of the field after their transportation, and driven the buckboard back to where she should have been standing. He'd at first thought she'd gone, till he espied a pale white hand upon the edge of the roadside ditch, and, on investigating the hand, located Harriet on the other end of it.

The sheriff was adamant. Marvin was there; no one else was. So Marvin did it. The sheriff was quite positive in his accusation, and determined to keep Marvin in jail till he rotted. And he probably would have done so, had not a group of the sheriff's

constituents — irritated because their horses were losing shoes like mad, and wagon spokes were falling out, and fenders needed undenting—insisted that Marvin be released to his blacksmith duties. The sheriff gave in, albeit grudgingly, but made Marvin promise to return to the jail at nightfall, which promise was given with alacrity.

The townsfolk were shocked that afternoon to learn that Marvin, on the pretext of going to Anchorville for supplies of some sort, had instead boarded a westbound express for San Francisco undoubtedly never to return.

The sheriff was about to put out a national alarm for the fugitive when a panicky farmer dashed into the sheriff's office to announce the second horror.

Abel Stanley, the town's leading hog-raiser, had been found dead in his pigpen, his noble heart forever stilled, his terrified blue eyes staring sightlessly into a trough of swill. And stuck into the brim of his hat was a shiny, blue-black feather.

And even as the sheriff was running toward Grogan's saloon for deputies, Tom the Barkeep came running out to

meet him with news of horror number three.

Edward Forbes — who, while not the town drunkard, was next in line for the office—had been discovered under the bar at Grogan's, his open mouth beneath the spigot of an emptied whisky keg, with a shiny black feather in his buttonhole, completely deceased. But this time the barkeep—under the clear-sighted direction of the sheriff (from the far end of the bar)—found a *mark* on the body; a strange-hued star-shaped discoloration beneath the left armpit. But on the coroner's report that this was a birthmark, the town threw up its hands in despair.

The panic began to spread through the heretofore placid village. Thelma Bracy's significant remarks about the Turk began to take their toll of credible people. Mothers in the town, hoping to discourage the apparently passionately neat killer, began to belt, whip and otherwise mar their children, as a safety measure. "Bruise 'em or lose 'em!" became the battle cry.

The Turk—and not strangely at all, since he was not on speaking terms with any of the villagers—had not yet, on this the third day after Harriet's demise, heard a thing

about the horrors. So it was not strange that he dared to show his face in the town square, striding along mightily toward Gulby's Drugstore. He thought it unusual that the town children, whose wont it was to dog his patient footsteps while chanting some abominably - rhymed ballad about cranberry sauce and people from Turkey, did not do so this day. Indeed, they all vanished into houses, up trees, and around corners as soon as the measured clump of his heavy boots announced his imminent arrival at the town square.

As he ducked his prodigious torso enough to permit passing his head through the door of the store, all the customers turned and stared at him, white-faced and speechless.

Gulby the Druggist who was the excitable type, blurted out, "It's *him!!* The *fiend!*" and made his short speech memorable by collapsing upon the toothpaste stand, his paunchy frame carrying the hapless display to the floor, where the weight of his body pressed resolutely downward, causing him to sag amid a spreading wobble of fluoridated dental cream.

"Evil eye!" screamed the villagers in the store, and, covering their eyes with one

hand, outstretched the other like stiff-arming football players and rushed pellmell from the drugstore.

Now the sheriff was really on the spot. An angry body of citizens came to his office and demanded that he arrest the monster (for, who could it be but the Turk?) at once, or they'd put their democratic powers of recall into immediate effect and elect a new sheriff.

That settled him. Bolstering up his courage for an hour at Grogan's Saloon, he proceeded to Mrs. Balsam's boarding house, up the stairs, called out the Turk (who came along amiably enough), and ensconced him in the cell so recently vacated by Marvin Sply. When he became sober enough to realize the enormity of what he'd done, he headed for Grogan's at once, to try and blot out the memory.

Well, the fat was in the fire.

With the arrest made, there had to be a trial.

The whole village perked up at the news. Ladies all went out and bought new dresses, new bonnets, new shoes, and new coats, and men all went over to Grogan's to discuss the facts of the case.

The sheriff was there, as usual, and as the men talked,

and the conversation became more uncertain and faltering, the horrible truth came out that no one at all knew *anything* about the case.

Immediate action had to be taken.

The sheriff's brother, who was also Assistant District Attorney, was the editor of the town paper. A quick phone call from the sheriff, and the Contest came out in the next issue of the East Anchorville News. The good word spread throughout Massachusetts.

Entries, mostly from women, started pouring in.

BE A WITNESS! proclaimed the paper. ENTER NOW!

Testimonies were chosen on the basis of thought, creative imagery, and knowledge of the English language. Thelma Bracy's was by far the best—due, she admitted freely, to a correspondence course she'd once taken in Novel Writing—and the town knew it had a star witness in Thelma.

Excitement was at its zenith. It was like the good old days of witch-hunting all over again.

The sun rose and set and rose again, and it was the day of the trial.

Everyone in town was packed into the narrow courthouse. People from neighbor-

ing townships had driven all night to get there for the gala event. Popcorn, cotton candy and cold beer—to the annoyance of the local clergy—were sold on the steps of the courthouse, and the judge, who owned the local brewery, was out there pushing the sales along until almost time for the trial to begin.

The widows of the deceased men—Gulby had passed away during his sensational tumble into the toothpaste, leaving the bereaved widow with her memories and thirty thousand dollars' Life Insurance—sat well up in front, waiting to see justice done. To ensure a fast pyrotechnic trial and a verdict of "guilty," they'd been careful to have the D.A. (the town's sharpest lawyer, and the brother-in-law of the local editor) send off to Anchorville for three of the greenest lawyers that could be found, fresh from Anchorville U. Law School, and from the three the widows had picked what they hoped was the dullest one.

Thomas Bit, their choice, now sat with the silent Turk, fingering his collar nervously, and sharpening his pencil every five minutes. The eyes of the eastern seaboard were upon the courthouse that day, and he'd be an overnight suc-

cess if he could bring in a verdict of "not guilty."

He wished that the town had been a little larger, for it had been impossible to get anyone on the jury who didn't seem to be either a relative of one of the dead men or a good friend of Harriet Cord. As far as that went, *all* the people seemed to have known Harriet Cord. Had she been the only victim, and had he been able to select a jury of the local women . . . Thomas Bit sighed.

His Honor, wiping a bit of foam off his chin, hurried up the aisle toward his chambers, vanished within them, then the court clerk called everyone to order, and the judge appeared in his solemn black robes, lunched up the steps to the bench, and sat with a loud thud, his eyes somewhat glazed and lips smiling inanely.

Thomas Bit noted this and groaned in his soul.

His Honor rapped sharply for order, dropped the gavel accidentally upon the bald pate of the court scribe, had it recovered and handed back to him rapped again, and the trial was on!

Ervin Burns, the D. A., approached the nervous Mrs. Balsam, his grey eyes steely and stern, and manner im-

peccably modeled after a movie he'd once seen of an infamous trial. Mrs. Balsam no bantamweight by any stretch of the imagination still managed to shrink to a more compact size as he loomed over her, pince-nez held between right forefinger and thumb.

"You are Nettie Balsam?"

"I am Nettie Balsam," she answered, after a thoughtful pause.

"You run the boarding house where the murderer lived?"

"Objection!" yelled Thomas Bit, springing to his feet. "The guilt of this man is what we are here to prove!"

The laughter in the courtroom was deafening until His Honor raised a tolerant hand and waved it to a chuckling murmur. "Please, Mister Bit, you must not interrupt Mister Burns at his work, if you wish the same consideration when she is *your* witness. Then you will have your chance."

Abashed, Thomas Bit sank shakily into his chair. "It looks pretty hopeless," he whispered to the Turk. The Turk merely shrugged his great shoulders and remained stolidly silent.

"You run the boarding house where the *alleged* murderer lived?" asked the D.A.

Thomas Bit sighed, softly, and chewed his nails.

"I do," said Mrs. Balsam. "I run a respectable place!" she added.

There were a few cheers from the front row, where some of her other boarders sat. Mister Balsam hadn't come that morning. He was at home asleep.

"And did you ever note anything . . . *mysterious* . . . about this man?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Balsam severely. "He never ate any of my cooking."

"Nothing mysterious about *that!*" came a sotto voce comment from the rear.

The D.A. cleared his throat, and stared the impertinent one into red-faced silence. Then he smiled at Mrs. Balsam.

"And why is that odd?"

"Because the meals're included in the room rates. Seems funny a man'd spend money for something and then not use it."

The D.A. smiled and nodded wisely. "Very funny, indeed. What, in your opinion is the reason for this?"

"Objection!" Thomas Bit was on his feet. "We're here to get facts, not opinions!"

The judge gave him a baleful stare. "Oh, *come now!*"

Thomas Bit sank into his

chair, completely defeated. "This is awful," he said to the Turk.

The Turk shrugged again and scratched the back of his head.

"In my opinion," she said, shuddering, "he didn't eat or drink anything because he lived on human blood! . . . Or *worse!*" she added, darkly.

Thomas Bit hid his face in his hands and manfully resisted bursting into tears.

"That will be all," smiled the D.A. "Your witness."

Thomas Bit composed himself as best he could and approached the witness stand. Mrs. Balsam looked at him warily, like a duck watching a woman stitching up a new pillowcase.

"Mrs. Balsam . . ." he began.

"Objection!" thundered the D.A.

"Sustained!" said the judge.

In the rear row, the editor of the paper smiled happily and wrote furiously in a small pad on his knee. Things were going indeed well, and it was an election year, too.

"Er . . ." Thomas Bit faltered, then tried again. "You *are* Nettie Balsam?"

"Yes," she said.

"Has the accused ever given you any trouble as a boarder?"

"Well, no . . . but—"

"Has he ever done anything positively unusual?"

"He didn't eat my cooking!"

"Then why—" Thomas Bit leaned forward, narrowing his eyes, "did you charge him for it?"

Nettie Balsam faltered. This was a side-issue the D.A. hadn't covered in rehearsals. "Because— Because with the extra money, I could buy more food for the other boarders!"

"Then," said Thomas Bit, pressing his point home, "you never *did* cook any meals for the Turk. I'll bet if I were to subpoena your boarders, it would turn out you never even set a place at the table for him! Is that correct?"

Nettie Balsam burst into tears. "Well, I did at first, for the first week he st-stayed at my place, b-but when I saw he wasn't going to eat, I j-just used the extra money." She broke into uncontrolled sobbing at this point and couldn't go on.

Thomas Bit paused until the flood had abated somewhat, then said in a more kindly tone: "Then the loss of this man as a boarder—if he is convicted—is taking money out of your pocket?"

Nettie's tear-blurred eyes widened at this insidious aspect of the thing, heretofore

unconsidered. "Why . . . you're right!"

Thomas Bit took a step back and indicated the Turk, sitting unperturbed at the table before the bench. "Then do you think this man had anything to do with the horrors?"

Before the shaken D.A. could object, Nettie Balsam shouted, "No! A thousand times no! He's innocent as a babe, and, when this is over, he'll have his own little room waiting for him same as always . . ." She hesitated. "At the same rates of course."

"Of course," said Thomas Bit. "You may step down."

Nettie Balsam did so, quite contented with herself. In the back row, the editor gnashed his teeth in impotent fury. And the three widows were frozen in stony hatred. Who did this young upstart think he was? The first good murder case in years and he's making out that the killer is innocent! One of them even wished, momentarily, that her husband were still alive.

The D.A., fairly recovered from the near-mortal blow dealt him, called Thelma Bracy to the stand. A hush fell over the room as she waddled proudly up to the small railed-in witness seat. After all, she was something

of a celebrity, the star witness whose picture was all over the front page of the local paper, looking knowing and wise.

She immediately crossed one knee over the other. Her knees were not visible, due to the wide slats of the railing, but she crossed them anyhow.

"Your name?" the D.A. was unctuously charming.

"Thelma. Thelma Bracy." She looked out to where reporters from neighboring towns were clustered, pencils poised over notebooks. "T-h-e-l-m-a B-r-a . . ."

"Miss Bracy—" the D.A. interrupted swiftly, "will you please tell the court where you live?"

"I live at 115 West Pike—P-i-k-e—right next door to the house where the *murderer* lived!"

All eyes in the room turned instantly to Thomas Bit, who now had his chance to louse things up. He sighed, shrugged, and shook his head. A murmur of relief went up, and one of the widows even smiled a little. Things were looking up.

"Would you please tell us," continued the D.A. "exactly what you saw on the night of the late-lamented Harriet Cord's demise?"

A profound hush settled

over the room, and all eyes riveted on Thelma, who cleared her throat carefully and began her tale.

"It was hard upon the hour of midnight," she said, almost in a whisper. Even Thomas Bit was magnetized by her tone. "Chill was the night, but fain did I long for a current of air to relieve the unwonted stuffiness of my bedchamber. Went I then toward my case—ment, to ope my room to the night air . . ." She paused, and added, less studiously, "My window's right across from the side of Nettie's boarding house . . ."

The hush grew more profound.

"The window of *that man's room!*" She stabbed a finger dramatically and accusingly at the Turk. "It was closed, but *lo!* there was a flickering light inside. I, of course, do not make it a prattice to look into the windows of men with whom I am hardly acquainted, so I was about to turn back to my bed, when suddenly—" Her face went blank. "When suddenly—" She repeated miserably, looking at the D.A., who had closed his eyes in exasperation.

Thelma drew back a pace in her monologue, and tried taking a running start to get over the hump. "I-was-about-to-

turn - back - to - my - bed - when - suddenly . . ." She brightened. "When *suddenly*, the window flew open, banging the sash quite loudly, and that man—" Some of the folks in the Turk's vicinity edged away from him furtively. "—peered out in a very suspicious fashion, then stepped he back from the window. Frozen to the spot by nameless apprehensions, waited I there, and then— Something big and black and horrible flopped onto his windowsill from within his room."

The D.A.—albeit having heard the tale at rehearsals—had still to moisten dry lips before speaking. "What was it?" he asked, his voice shaky.

"A giant blackbird!" said Thelma.

(Careful research on her part into Arabian customs and history had unearthed the fact that the raven was considered an almost-sacred harbinger of dire things by the Arabs and Turks, and she'd changed the name of the bird into a species conforming to her listeners' experience.)

"It flapped its great black wings, rose into the air, and then, as though sensing something, it flew away."

"Which way—" the D.A. made the question assume

great importance by his tone, "—Which way did it fly?"

Thelma paused dramatically, then looked upon the Turk with the eye of a basilisk, rose to her feet and said, "Straight east!"

A furor broke out in the room. The body of Harriet Cord had been found almost due east of the Town; in the minds of the townsfolk, the guilt of the Turk was as good as written on the court record.

Thomas Bit shook his head. There was nothing to do but sit tight and wait for his turn at Thelma.

She hadn't finished. "Something made me stay there, watching, for almost a quarter of an hour. Finally, it had grown too cold to stand by the window, so I closed it. And just as I did, the blackbird flew back, and it heard the window closing, because it turned and looked at me. And suddenly I was terribly afraid, and I ran back to my bed and did throw myself under the blankets!"

"And then?" asked the D.A.

". . . I fell asleep," she finished lamely.

"Your witness." said the D.A. to Thomas Bit.

Thomas Bit took a deep breath to steady his nerves and approached the stand. "Miss Bracy," he said, "are

you aware that it was early evening when Marvin Sply went out with Harriet Cord on her ill-fated ride?"

"Of course," she said. "Everyone knows that."

"And are you further aware that he was back in a matter of hours?"

"Sure," she said.

"Then how could there possibly be any connection between the blackbird you claimed you saw and Harriet Cord's death, if the blackbird's nocturnal flight was shortly after midnight?"

Thelma drew herself up, proud and confident. "A supernatural creature is not bound by the ordinary laws of time and space," she replied.

There was considerable applause from the spectators, which the judge indulgently permitted to die down of its own accord, while Thomas Bit gritted his teeth to keep from breaking down and sobbing.

"Spematural!?" he said, fiercely. "Do you expect a court of law to recognize such a statement?"

"Son," said the judge, not unkindly, "this is the State of Massachusetts . . ."

Approaching despair, Thomas Bit tried one more query.

"Would you kindly tell the court just what you think this 'blackbird' of yours did

to cause the deaths of Miss Cord and the three men, Stanley, Forbes and Gulby?"

"Certainly," said Thelma. "That man is a werebird!"

"A *werebird*?" Thelma nodded. "Human by day, feathered fiend by night. Flying the countryside after sundown, in hideous unnatural guise, sucking the souls from helpless people that cross his gruesome path!"

"Your Honor," said Thomas Bit, "I move that this testimony be stricken from the record as irrelevant, fanciful, and just plain ridiculous."

"Overruled," said His Honor.

Shoulders drooping, Thomas Bit said, "No further questions," and returned to his seat, beside his client.

"I call Herbert Hoskins, M. D., to the stand," said the D.A. The town coroner arose and made his way to the witness seat.

As Thomas Bit doodled hopelessly on a pad of paper, hardly listening to the testimony of the coroner, a hand fell lightly upon his shoulder. He looked up into the face of a stranger, a sporty-looking fellow with a pink-tipped nose and thick muttonchop sidewhiskers. The stranger winked his eye.

"Having a bit of difficulty, eh?" he smiled.

"Who are you?" asked the lawyer.

"Wallen's the name, son. Wilbert Wallen. I'm sort of a speciaist in rare diseases. That's why I'm here."

Thomas Bit cocked an eyebrow at the stranger. "I'm afraid I don't see—"

"You will, son, you will," said Wilbert Wallen, seating himself beside the young lawyer. "I'm your star witness."

"My *what*?" said Thomas Bit.

Wallen began to explain, in a low, urgent whisper. As his meaning became clear to Bit, the lawyer's eyes grew round, and the subtle beginnings of a smile touched his lips for the first time that day.

"You're kidding!" he said to Wallen.

"Scout's honor," said the specialist. "Soon's I read about the case in the papers, I got to East Anchorville fast as I could."

"Zowie!" said Thomas Bit, reverently.

Burns, the D.A., finished with Hoskins.

"Your witness," he said.

"No questions," said Thomas Bit.

"Not giving up, are you?"

asked the D.A. with a tiny simpering smile.

"I call Wilbert Wallen, M.D., to the stand," said the lawyer. The courtroom buzzed, and the D.A. and the judge exchanged looks, raised eyebrows, and shrugs as Wallen took the stand.

"Your name?" asked Thomas Bit.

"Wilbert Wallen."

"Occupation?"

"Pathologist. My specialty is rare diseases."

The room grew strangely quiet.

"Can you perhaps throw some light on these four deaths which the accused is supposed to have brought about?"

"*Light*?" Wallen chuckled. "I can tell you exactly what caused them!"

"Would you please do so . . .?" said Thomas Bit.

"Well . . ." Wallen cleared his throat, loudly. "I have just come from the Ogilvy Funeral Parlor, wherein Miss Cord, and Messieurs Gulby, Forbes and Stanley are lying in state. It seems as if the employees of that establishment were all over here at the trial—in fact, this whole burg looks like a ghost town today—so I took the opportunity to examine the four."

"That's against the law!"

thundered the judge. "Without a court order, bodies of deceased persons may not be subjected to—"

"Your honor," Thomas Bit interrupted smoothly, "in this case, there was no time to await a court order."

"No time?" said the judge. "What do you mean, no time?"

"For the sake of the town—which includes Your Honor, of course—Doctor Wallen had to move quickly."

The spectators murmured, louder and louder, until the judge rapped for silence. "Mister Bit! Are you implying . . . There's something *ominous* in your tone."

"If Your Honor will hear Doctor Wallen out?"

"Most irregular . . ." His Honor hedged. Then his curiosity got the better of his jurisprudence, and he nodded. "Very well. But it better be good."

"I found," Wallen continued, "that Miss Harriet Cord was what you might call a 'carrier'. A sort of Typhoid Mary."

The judge's face paled. "A carrier of *what*?" he said, in a hoarse whisper.

"A very rare disease, known in the trade as *Leprosus Arboris*, a sort of cross between Jungle Rot and Chest-

nut Blight. The victim's innards turn to sawdust. It's more or less painless. There's no approach in this disease, no warnings. One moment you're full of vigor, the next moment . . . 'Foosh.'"

"Foosh?" asked the judge.

Wallen nodded. "All the internal organs crumble into a nice oaken dust." He sighed, and scratched his nose. "It's rather painfully obvious what happened. Somehow, those unfortunate men came in contact with Miss Cord—"

The three widows stiffened and gasped in unison.

"—and they were goners."

All over the courtroom, men were losing color, and wives were narrowing eyes. The judge, his face the color of buttermilk, asked, with a break in his voice, "Is— Is there any cure?"

"Oh, certainly." Wallen smiled. "Rose petals."

"Rose petals?" A note of hope had crept into the judge's voice. He had a rosebush on his estate, and he was certain the autumn cold had spared a few tiny buds.

"Yup," said Wallen. "No processing, either. Just pop one in your mouth like candy, chew it, swallow it, and presto!, you're as good as new."

At the rear of the room, a

man slipped toward the door, then another man, and another. His Honor's eye caught the motion, and he remembered that his rosebush was near the roadside where everyone in town must have admired it.

Judge, D.A., coroner, sheriff, editor and every last townsman in the room clawed, punched and kicked his way out the door.

When the thundering died down, and the dust began to settle, Thomas Bit shook Wallen's hand.

"I guess the case is dismissed," he said. "You've made me a success. I've won my first case. Is there anything I can do for you? Can I buy you a beer, take you to lunch, pay for your transportation to your home?"

Wallen laughed and clapped Bit on the back, shaking his head. "No thanks, son. Don't drink beer, brought my lunch, and my transportation's arranged for."

He picked up a small bag, tied with twine, and began to undo it. The Turk, smiling happily, sat down beside Wallen. "Thanks, Uncle Wilbert," he said, fondly.

"Least I could do." Wallen smiled. "You being my sister's boy, and all."

"You're related?" Thomas Bit gasped.

"Well, of course." Then Wallen frowned. "Gad, son, don't tell me *you* fell for that mumbojumbo on the stand?"

"I—" Thomas Bit sank weakly onto a bench. "You mean it wasn't true? The disease and all?"

"Heck, no," said Wallen. "Made the whole danged thing up outa my head. Good, wasn't it? . . . Gosh, boy, I ain't even a doctor."

Bit's heart sank slowly into the quicksand of dread that oozed into his breast. "But all those people—out in the cold—eating roses!—"

"Won't hurt 'em none," said Wallen, smiling. "Fresh air'll do em good."

"But why'd you *do* it?" asked Thomas Bit.

Wallen finished unwrapping his lunch, and indicated the Turk with a tilt of his head. "Couldn't let him down. My only sister's boy, you know. She died. I brought him up."

"You brought him up . . ." Thomas Bit mumbled blankly.

"Sure," said Uncle Wilbert. "Raised him from an egg."

As icy horror began to tickle Thomas Bit's frayed nerve-endings, Uncle Wilbert leaned over to him in a friendly manner and extended the box of lunch.

"Have a worm?" he asked.

THE END

A GRAIN OF MANHOOD

By PHYLLIS GOTLIEB

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

*The child was conceived in mystery,
and delivered in fear. But the strange
magic of Kolanddro was not yet over.*

SHE was lying formless; the contour of her body was lost except for the white ring of pain that worked its way downwards every so often like a wedding ring over a swollen knuckle. All her other miseries were encompassed by this masterpiece of nature, a force at one with lightning and thunder, the hurricane, the great reach of the four-thousand-year-old sequoia.

In the intervals she was a person again, and she turned her eyes to James, who was standing at the window watching white peaks rising out of the shadow of night. And she asked for the first time, "James, what will you do when this is over?"

"I don't know." He spoke through the window to the sky. In spite of the unexpected

hurry to the hospital he was wearing his dark suit, pressed and fresh, and a tie knotted with painful neatness.

"Why do you always call me James?" he asked suddenly. "Why not Jim, or any other short thing?"

She would have said, Why not, it's your name, but she was too miserable for even the feeblest humor. "I don't know. You always seemed like a James to me. Hair parted neatly, folded handkerchief in pocket, buckled briefcase." And on Earth perhaps a bowler hat and tight furled umbrella. "It seemed suitable."

"You mean stodgy and prissy."

"No, James, just suitable. It seems right for you, and I've always liked you as you are."

But he kept his lips com-

pressed and his eyes on the white peaks.

The hospital lay in the crater's plain circled by the mountains of Axmith's Territory II. Not a person in the whole of the Community who did not know them, and all he had ever wanted was to dissolve among them like a grain of salt without much more color or savor. She liked him as he was—and what she had done to him!

"You never have explained to me—" he began.

"Oh, James, let it go!" She tensed suddenly on the bed and then tried to make herself limp and slide under the coil of pain. "You wouldn't let me, all those dreadful months. Now I don't want to."

Light reflected back on his face from the mountains of Axtu, and for a moment it showed open and vulnerable. Warily she rested her hands over the frenetic writhing in her belly and said bitterly, "A virgin birth would have seemed more reasonable to you."

He said in the precise way she claimed she had never hated, "There are at least three people on Axtu beside us who know I am sterile."

Shut up! Shut up! You married me because there was a good job for a married man

out here! Shut up! "And of course no-one could want me but you, James, it seems certain to you." Perhaps not. She stared at the pale green ceiling, green walls, palely enameled night-table, water-pitcher, callow-colored with the uncertain light reflected from the western wall of the pumice crater. All things sullen, solid, a hard shine to them. In her mind colors flickered, shifting pure prism-hues, only paled and whitened by pain, till she opened her eyes to the nothingness of reality.

"It's almost impossible to explain," she said. "I know it's the old song—"

He opened his mouth and closed it. Then he said, "When *that* is born—"

"I'll go away, if you like. You'll never have to see me or it again."

"Don't be foolish. It can't be hidden now. Damn it, why couldn't you have gotten rid of it, like any other woman?"

"Why couldn't you have had children like any other man?" she said softly. It drew the blood to his face. Could she ever have pretended to love this man, who used so much nastiness to cover his vulnerability? She said gently, "When we found we couldn't

have children, I couldn't help being restless . . . all the money we'd saved with my working, and I hadn't seen my folks for three years . . ." The time-old tale of alien grain. No use saving the money for the child, and she used it to visit Earth.

But she had forgotten that life on Earth was what she had married to get away from. There was nothing for her, and all she had was her return fare to Axtu, and she started back.

But the shipwreck changed it.

She shared the liferaft with the mutilated body of an old woman who had taught her to embroider the Italian Hemstitch a few hours before; it took three days till the boat homed on a safe planet and landed battered and useless on the rocky shores of a lake. The equipment seemed crushed. The radio had told her that the air and water were compatible, but now it was silent, and she had no idea whether it was still sending the automatic SOS, nor how to repair it or use it.

She crawled outside at last, poising on jagged rocks that bruised her feet, and looked out over the grey expanse of the lake, flat and sunless.

"This is nothing worse than

the hell I've always lived in," she thought. She grinned in despair and went back into the boat to salvage food.

The lake was in a crater-like depression, a stony saucer of water, and she was unable to see beyond the rim. She had been asleep when the boat landed and had never seen the planet's face—a grim tumbling sleep with the consciousness of the blanket-wrapped body beside her, the vacuum of loneliness in an old woman who died without her descendants around her. There was only one other blanket. She stuffed it into a canvas bag with some concentrates and a canteen and slung it over her shoulder. There was not much to eat. Even if there was her survival would only be a matter of inertia.

She stared around once more. There was no sign of movement, not a wind carrying gull-cries, scuttling run of lizard, or oozing of any alien life she might have imagined. The air and water might be all right, but the planet gave no sign of being any more generous than that.

There was a tinge of chill to the grey air; she wiped sweating palms on her skirt as she began to climb up the rim. Once her foot dislodged a

stone; it rolled downward for a few feet, and that was the first sound she heard beyond the beating of her own heart.

She climbed, and before she reached the top she began to hear something more: the trill of a pipe so faint and uncertain it might have been the singing of blood in her brain. But it grew and paced with her as she stumbled on; it traced the whorl of her ear.

Light grew overhead, palely, and then burst into a burning sun; as though she had risen out of a cloud the sky became blue. The points of the rocks dulled, the ground softened. She was walking on clipped green turf.

She stopped, took off her shoes, and stood with her toes pressed in the grass, dropping the canvas bag from her shoulder. The piper was walking beside her, fingering the stops. His scales were blue, green, amber, and silver; colors writhed on him like the lights on a peacock's neck.

The unfluid walls of plaster and fiber-board faced her, and the falsely soothing colors of metal-frame tables. "That was Kolandro," she said. "I didn't have to explain anything to him. He knew already."

"As I never did," said

James, and added half under his breath, "—and never will."

She remembered the months of nights she had lived alone with a half-formed creature in her, screaming in nightmare that it was clawing and ripping its way out through the frail membranes of protection that were all she had been able to give it—or maintain against it . . .

The former face of the planet had crumbled like a clay mask. Here there were many heavy-leaved trees; grass grew damp and cool beneath them. But in the sunshine the strange people who lived here had raised gaudy, paper pavilions of pure color. They came at the sound of the pipe and gathered round her. She would have said that they were dressed, but they were wearing only the fur, scales, or bat-wings their curious nature had given them, and there were no two alike.

They were humanoid, but flat-nosed and narrow-jawed; it was hard to find the form beneath the skin. Some of the feathered and crested ones looked like the Eighteenth-Century Romantic's idea of the Noble Savage, but she was unable to find either nobility or evil in their faces.



The scaled man beside her said, "This is Nev; I'm Kolanddro, and you see these are my people. You came from the wrecked boat."

"I did. However did you learn my language?"

"I translate alien tongues. I'm the Interpreter." That explained it to him, perhaps.

He lowered his shining lids with the effect of a smile. "You'll understand it later."

"I see. You people are telepathic."

"No. *I'm* telepathic. That's why I'm the Interpreter."

"And I don't have to tell you that my name's Lela Gordon, and that I'm from Earth, etc."

"Nor ask to see anyone more important than me, because no-one will understand you."

She smiled, and then sighed. "It doesn't seem very easy to leave here. Can you help me?"

But he had turned to speak to someone, and she looked around at the Nevids who had approached her. They returned her interest with a kind of inoffensive curiosity, and when they had seen enough left to go about their business. Kolanddro brought her a bowl of fruit and fresh bread.

"We don't make this kind of thing with our grain, but we

baked it when it became evident that you would be with us."

"Are you clairvoyant too?"

He made a glittering gesture. "I have a great range. There's little I can't do here." He blinked. "No, I cannot repair your boat. We haven't many hard metals here—and besides, we don't need them." He pointed out a winged man who resembled the Spirit of Communication which for centuries had graced the telephone book. "We have Messengers." He tapped his head. "We have Interpreters." Recognizing the panic rising in her he said quite anxiously, "Please eat. You won't come to any harm here."

"I believe you," she said. "But the strangeness—it's almost overpowering." But she calmed her fears finally and ate her meal under the tossing dappled shade. The bread was rather heavy, but good enough for something of which the recipe had been deduced from a fleeting picture in a sleeping mind.

Kolanddro asked suddenly, "What is lemon soufflé?"

"Something I'm glad I didn't dream of while I was sleeping," said Lela. She added very gently, "I really don't like having my mind read."

"While you are staying

here, you will have to get used to it," said Kolanddro.

But I don't want to stay here. It filled her with uneasiness, the strangeness and the sense of having already become completely integrated into the life of the planet in an hour's time. She thought of the old woman dead in the boat who might have been happy to spend the last years of her age under his sun, and brushed crumbs from her skirt.

"I think I'd better stay near the boat in case the signal's working."

He stared at her with his black and green eyes. "You'll never reach the boat without my help," he touched the pipe, "and you won't come back, or even remember all this. There will be no more food or shelter for you."

She said slowly, "Open Sesame?"

"The connotation's unclear. I see, an old story (perhaps you'll tell it to me sometime?)—yes, something like that."

"Kolanddro," she spoke to his still shadow on the grass, "... are you an illusion?"

"You will have to decide that for yourself."

The chill that crimped her skin was not an illusion, at least not more so than the whole cosmos of matter.

Where in relation to this place was the grey lake and the overcast sky?

"There's nothing to be afraid of here," said Kolanddro. He ran a pearl nail around the rind of a yellow fruit and halved it. "But if you stay here, you must live as one of us. We like privacy and we don't let anyone leave us who'll endanger it. You must understand that."

"There is a great deal of beauty here," she said reluctantly.

"There is," he said. "We know what kinds of things aliens will bring us. We've had experiences with them." He stood up. "I'm busy now, but most people like to rest in the heat of the afternoon. I think you will be glad of a rest; you may have my house." He pointed out a particularly vivid pavilion of crimson and purple. He swallowed the rest of the fruit, spat out four green pips into the palm of his hand, and cast them to the winds.

"Four more zimb trees," he said.

"You had already forgotten me by then," said James.

"James, I thought you would have been glad to forget me . . . they wouldn't have taken your job away from you

here just because your wife was lost in space."

"That wasn't why I married you."

"If there was another reason it was because feeling so trodden on yourself you had to have someone to hurt in turn."

"Don't, Lela. I never meant to hurt you."

But she was thinking of the last few months of sullen meals, crushing silence and loneliness. *What in hell are we going to do with a little creature who looks as if he'd escaped from a prism, no matter how appealing he may be esthetically? How can we keep him here? How can we hide him?*

The color flows on you like the broken light of a prism.

"All you people," she said to Kolanddro, "have the same form basically—I think—but there are no two of you alike on the surface. That seems impossible."

"Not when our germ plasm is almost infinitely tractable."

"What do you mean?"

"We can take in any form of intelligent alien life. The children become pure Nevids within three generations."

"How?"

"All psychokinetic faculties on Nev don't rest in the Interpreters—although I will say," he added complacently, "that

most of the intelligence does. All Nevid parents have a choice in deciding before the child is born what form it will take—at least externally, not in the vital organs."

"And the child has no choice in the matter?"

"No. His happiness depends on how well he lives with the shape we give him."

"And if he doesn't?"

"He'll have an unhappy but interesting life."

She shivered. "I don't think I'd like that for my children."

He waved an arm around at the Colony and the multi-colored flow of the strange people and the windrippled walls of their houses. "A quarter of these people were descended from aliens. We've found for every alien an Interpreter who could bring him into the life of the planet. I don't think any of them have been unhappy."

"I can't believe that I would ever be a part of your life."

"I am no more part of the life here than you are. The Interpreter is born, not made by the longings of his parents, and he comes no more often than—" he searched her mind for the parallel "—the true genius on your planet. Man or woman, he gives up private life."

"Your laws are cruel."

"Only as cruel or weak as the people who live by them. Do I seem that way to you?" he asked.

She never really knew the shapes of their souls nor the range of their emotions, and only had rare glimpses of the mines and orchards, weavers and goldbeaters, that produced what she used and ate. Sometimes she thought she had glimpses of city spires beyond the forests, and though she knew that the Colonies often shifted with the seasons, there was no change as long as she was with them, and she never found out what they traded for with couns or feathers, or if they sacrificed the living on stone altars, nor the names of their strange gods.

She woke late one morning after a restless night; she was queasy and aching, and was struck with the sudden fear that she was going to have a child. She made some breakfast, and when Kolanddro came in and stood silently looking at her, her teeth began to chatter. He only smiled, and loosening a strand of her hair laid it across his green-white palm, where it lay very black, as though he were matching samples of material.

"I can't go through with this," she whispered.

He said gravely, "You mustn't think that way. You've accepted our conditions . . . I have had to accept them." But she turned away. What had he had to give up?

Late afternoon when the sun was falling toward the west, a woman dropped down from the sky. She did not come directly into the encampment where the people had gathered around the cooking fires, but folded her wings and waited at the edge of the clearing, searching in the shifting colored frieze her people made out of their most common and ordinary actions.

Finally Kolanddro noticed her and moved forward; Lela turned from her task to watch them as they spoke, soundless shadows in a green shade. Something in their attitudes made her very still, though her halting command of the language would not have allowed her to understand them even if she had heard their voices. The Nevid woman pointed toward the west; her downy hands flickered and her head lifted urgently against his calm attitude; at last they stood still and faced each other without speaking.

Then she turned away and

came into the clearing where there was a late gold patch of sunlight lingering; she stopped and stood with her head bent down, almost as though to thrust it under her wing. Soundless and motionless she waited for the desire for flight to thicken her wings with blood. When the great delicate membranes opened finally, she rose against the sun in a blaze of heraldic red, diminished and was gone. But Lela soared with her in imagination over thickets and rolling hills, perhaps past stone towers and shimmering rivers, half blinded by the deep light that warmed the clear air, and without pleasure in the flight.

A voice murmurled in her ear that the meat was scorching, and she felt both foolish and sick: she recognized Kolanddro's sacrifice to the laws of Nev. When she looked again, she saw that he was gone. He came out of the pavilion a few minutes later; he was wearing an obsidian dagger.

It was not until after supper that she saw the stranger emerge along the forest trail from the same direction the woman had come. He was a crested and feathered man as splendid of his type as Kolanddro; Kolanddro washed

his face and hands in a basin and then went out to meet him. They stood facing each other for a moment in a pantomime of tense hieratic gesture she might have imagined among the Egyptians. Kolanddro spoke, unfastening his belt with the dagger and laying it on the ground. He moved his hands in a wide gesture as if to erase whatever angers were between them, and they turned and separated.

Lela sat waiting for him in the pavilion. The sun had almost set and the evening air had thickened to a sweet dusk heavy with the smells of flowers and fruit; indoors was the heart of a rose. The simple dress the Nevids had made for her slid over her body into thick folds out of a Renaissance artist's sketch-book. In the sky there was a liquid atmosphere of mauve and pearl flowing with the last of the sun.

Kolanddro came in, his mind so full of his own affairs he could not have known what was in hers. "That was a long journey for nothing," he said.

She said, "I think he'll make it again one day. I'm going back."

He stood and stared at her. She went on falteringly, "I know it will give you im-

measurable trouble to put things right—but they will be right . . . I thought I could be a moral person merely by accepting the inevitable; now I no longer believe it is inevitable. I can't stay here any longer. I must return."

"If you leave here we can't take you back—you understand that?"

"I understand—the kind of law that allows you to risk death fighting a rival even when you're the most important member of a community."

He said simply, "A superman on your world would have to live by the same laws as the rest."

"I agree, and I don't think your laws are unjust, or even inflexible—but they aren't sensitive." The word conjured James very clearly before her, with his capacities for loneliness and self-laceration, and suddenly time, even a lifetime, seemed very short. "They've gotten stunted somewhere along the way, and on Earth they're always reaching, like a tree, for the ultimate justice. Not in lawcourts only, but in relations between persons. The structure gets terribly complicated and top-heavy, but it's a growing one."

"If people on Earth are much like you I think they

make themselves extremely miserable over nothing."

"That's true enough, too. Will you let me go?"

"No-one may ever find you out there."

"I have enough food to last a while, and there's the water."

"My son?"

"I think you'll have other sons," she said pleadingly. "I can't stay."

"What can you and your husband make of him on Earth?"

She winced. "Perhaps someone who could love both Earth and Nev."

"No, he won't know anything of Nev." He kept his grave regard on her, and she waited. Finally he said: "When everything is quiet, I'll take you back to the boat. I'll break the law, for you, and not tell the others."

When the night was dark and quiet I took off the dress the Nevids had made for me and put on the one I came in. Render unto Caesar. We went down along the smooth grass, and the colors shimmered on him even in the dark. All I could think of, feeling so foolish and sick, was that he was going to kill that splendidly feathered man, or be killed, and I couldn't say anything,

because I'd already told him what I thought of his laws.

"But we don't fight to the death," he said suddenly.

"Thank you."

"Our law would never allow anyone to leave as cold and unprotected as you are doing. I must bring you food and clothing."

"I don't want them, I think they'd make me feel worse." But there was one thing I wanted from him. I knew he guessed it, but I spoke it aloud anyway.

"Kolanddro. Don't make me forget Nev."

I found my canvas bag. It was weatherproof, but the shoes were rotted from nights of dew and days of hot sun.

He put the pipe to his mouth, and I had one glance of his fingers glittering on the stops, and then the stones

cut her feet. She stood there on the sharp edges, like the transformed mermaid who walked on knives of pain as long as she had legs. She thought she could hear a last thin echo of the pipe, but it faded into the hollow lapping of the waters on the shore under the night wind.

There was no clear memory of how long she waited on the shore, days and nights. She ate concentrates when hunger became painful, and drank

water when her tongue rattled in her throat, and nightmares chattered around her. She wondered that the baby lived, but it clung fiercely to the fetal stalk and thrived, walled away from her terrors. She could hardly move when a loud bleep sounded in the boat, at last, and she crawled into the terrible place on hands and knees to pick away at the wreckage and find the source, and push the switch that told them she was there. When the rescue ship lifted, she was in a bunk tossing with fever; she never saw the face of the planet.

"Lela."

She was fastened in one clench of force. "Please call the nurse now, James," she whispered. He pressed the buzzer.

"You came back, even when you could have died out there—"

"James, I could fall downstairs on my head any time, or pull a hangnail and get septicemia; it's a chance. But I don't care now. I just want to die."

"Don't talk like that! I want you to live and be happy. With me, whatever happens! I love you, Lela . . ."

But the mist was rising before her eyes, red as the blood

in the wings of the Nev woman against the sun.

She opened her eyes once out of the chaos of pain and sound; a rubbergloved hand was holding a shining thing by the heels, a baby gleaming with the last detritus of amniotic fluid. She sank back again.

He was a complete and perfect replica of James, down to the last neat lock of dark hair on his forehead. A stranger in the world, he lay beside her; his arms and legs trembled, his face crumpled, his pink hands moved aimlessly with unconscious grace.

"I can't understand it," said James, ". . . but he is beautiful. Lela, I have to tell you this now; I thought I could get away with it, but I can't. I knew I was sterile before we were married."

"I guessed it," she said. "That was really why I went away. I was going to leave you. But it doesn't matter now."

"But you did come back."

"Yes. I didn't expect much."

The months gone, the long slow growth of a child in her: the woman's right she had wanted so deeply—eclipsed in bitterness and recrimination. She smiled without joy. "The tie that binds."

But he said quietly, without

arrogance, "No. This depends on us."

She bent to smell the newness of the child's flesh, and to feel the hands on her face. "All right, James."

The white sun of Axtu was very clear and warm in the

room. She moved her clean drained body under the sheets, grateful enough to have her breasts ripening with milk, the baby in her arm, and James beside her with the faint pulsing of hope between them.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

Remember *No Blade of Grass*, the first science-fiction novel to be featured as a **SATURDAY EVENING POST** serial?



Well, author **John Christopher** tops the line-up for the October **FANTASTIC** with a touching story of love in a strange future earth. *Winter Boy, Summer Girl* is outstanding science fiction.

If **Ed Valigursky's** cover picture (left) looks unusual, it's because it illustrates an unusual story—**A. Bertram Chandler's** *Magic, Magic Carpet*. It's a hilarious mixture of adventure and humor, with probably the wildest theories of interplanetary travel ever conceived.

Backing up these two leaders will be a covey of short stories and all the usual features.

The October FANTASTIC goes on sale September 22. To be sure of your copy, reserve it at your newsdealer now.

THE TOY

By
HENRY
SLESAR

There have been many attempts to write fables about the creation of the world. Here, in 1000 brief words, is a chilling variant that may make you stop and think—or stop and shudder.

IN A VAST kingdom surrounded by a single sea, a renowned and mighty Emperor named Habdirab married the loveliest woman in the known universe. As great was his joy in her, his happiness reached a still higher pinnacle on the day she presented him with the sweet fruit of their union, a male child perfect in form. The Emperor showered such torrents of love upon the boy that his advisors clucked in fear lest the child be spoiled by so much adoration, but the Emperor failed to heed their warnings. As the child grew, Habdirab expressed his love in the only manner he knew, with gifts so splendid that each was worth the holdings and estates of many princes of the realm. With

every passing year, the gifts became more lavish, more costly, and more complex. Chief among them were toys, for toys brought more pleasure to the child than golden robes or jeweled implements, and the Emperor scoured the land for new and wondrous playthings that would delight the child of his heart. But then, the ominous prophecies of the elders came true, and the boy, called Japhida, began expressing discontent with each new offering, displeased by all gifts not more extraordinary than the last.

Despite the pleadings of his wife, Habdirab failed to see the faults of his actions, and gave way to tantrums as violent as those the child was then indulging in. "Why must the son of Habdirab

have ordinary playthings?" he would cry. "Why cannot the toymakers of my kingdom create more ingenious toys?" But before long, the Emperor had exhausted the inventiveness of the toymakers, and the temper and impatience of Japhida grew more terrible every day.

Then, one morning, the son of Habdirab fell ill. Some said the malady was a brain fever, the result of the boy's own poisonous tantrums. But Habdirab had no ears for the wise diagnoses of the elders; he mourned his son's indisposition as if it had been a blight fallen upon the kingdom. And he decided that only more indulgence could make Japhida well.

For this purpose, he issued a proclamation throughout the land, offering a reward of great wealth and honor to any subject who could create a toy so marvelous that it would gladden the heart and restore the health of his beloved child. Every day, for many months, the proclamation was trumpeted over the width and breadth of the empire, until every subject with a speck of cleverness in his mind and a mite of skill in his hands was thirsting after the glorious reward. Farmers de-

serted their plows, weavers their looms, workmen their implements, artists their canvasses, all in the hope of claiming their prize. But few, if any, reckoned on the magnitude of young Japhida's weary sophistication concerning toys.

Still they came, hopefully bringing their creations. There was a magnificent doll, taller than the boy himself, that could walk, and converse, and play childish games, a veritable automaton playmate. But Japhida looked up into its unblinking eyes and his own remained hot with fever and disinterest. There was a fabulous flying machine, light as the wings of a bird, a magic carpet with which Japhida could conquer the skies of the empire, but Japhida turned away from it. There was a miniature army, each private, sergeant, captain, major and general so life-like that the beholder blinked in surprise, each delicately engineered with tiny gears and springs that enabled them to march and strut and die like soldiers should. There was a set of a hundred thousand building blocks of mother-of-pearl, with gold pillars and buttresses and jeweled doors and shutters. There was a mechanical

horse, so swiftly maneuvered by its gleaming mechanism that it could outpace the fastest stallion in the Emperor's stable. There were toys that moved, that sang, that flew, that promised hours of fascination for any child, except the son of Habdirab, who looked upon them all with eyes of fireless coal and turned his head aside.

As Japhida worsened, the fever burned more deeply into his brain, and his speech became the halting mumble of the dumb, his hands the fumbling appendages of the blind, his wit the dull reasoning of the idiot. But his symptoms only increased the Emperor's fervid desire to find the perfect toy, and he doubled and redoubled his promises of glory.

Then, one day, a message was received from the greatest scientist of Habdirab's kingdom, a man whose brilliance set him apart from ordinary subjects, who lived as grandly as any prince or courtier of the realm. His name was Lagridum, and never before had he emerged from the Silver Tower which Habdirab had provided for him and his experiments, the tower where he lived happily among the things of science.

His coming was a surprise to the Emperor, but he was even more astonished to hear the scientist's words.

"My Emperor," he said, "great is the love I have borne you all the years of your life, and greater still is the sorrow I feel for you in these days of your affliction. I am not a toymaker, but I have come from my tower with a gift which has taken many years of my lifetime to bring into being, a marvel so extraordinary that it surpasses all other children of my brain. I offer it to you now, as the token of my affection for yourself and your child."

Eagerly, the Emperor asked: "What is this marvel, Lagridum? What toy could be born in the tower of Science?"

"A toy, Emperor, which will pleasure your son more than any before it. A toy which allows the child to create for himself, to find infinite variety in his own mind. It is from creation that lasting interest comes, and I believe my gift will occupy the prince for many happy years. With your permission, I will have the toy brought forth."

Eyes glowing, the Emperor leaned forward on his throne as the servants of the scientist entered the great room,

bearing between them a transparent cage. They set the huge container upon the floor, and Habdirab looked upon a galaxy in miniature floating within the recesses of the chamber. "From the substances of which all matter is composed," the scientist said, "I have created within this machine a universe of exquisitely small size. And in this universe, I have placed a world upon which your child may do anything he pleases. Simply by attaching these electrodes," Lagridum said, holding up the devices before the Emperor's fixed gaze, "he will be enabled to place upon this world any number of creatures he fancies, and guide their destinies as the spirit moves him. So you see, honored Emperor, its possibilities for amusement are limited only by the imagination, that greatest gift of all."

Habdirab looked upon this incredible invention of the scientist, and his heart filled

with joy as he recognized the truth of the great man's words. Swiftly, he ordered the toy brought to the room of the ailing Japhida, and as the scientist explained its marvels to the boy, the young eyes emitted light for the first time in months, and fumbling with eagerness, the son of Habdirab placed the electrodes into position.

"There is only one thing that troubles me," the Emperor whispered to the scientist. "Since his illness, the wit of my son is not what it should be. Will it matter, Lagridum?"

"Only to the tiny world of which he is master," the scientist smiled. "But look! Already the boy has shaped the land and the sea of his planet!"

"No," the Emperor said, delighting in the transformation of his son. "Not one sea, as in our kingdom. One, two, three, four, five, six—seven!"

THE END



He was Black Bart, Scourge of the Spaceways. He was always polite to his victims. Which was more—much more—than you could say for . . .

THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

HIS name was Bartholemew Perkins, but he preferred to be known as Black Bart. He was all of six and a half feet tall and broad to match. His gray eyes gleamed coldly from his deeply tanned face and there was a fine mahogany polish to his bald head. His black beard, of which he was inordinately proud, grew out in a great bush from his cheeks and chin. He was Master of the starship *Black Joke* out of Barbary.

Some historians have made play with the idea that the name of that planet influenced the conduct of its colonists. This is doubtful, just as it is doubtful that any of those same colonists had ever heard of the Barbary Corsairs who once harried sea-borne com-

merce on Earth's Mediterranean Sea. (Barbary, as a matter of fact, was named, more or less, for Barbara, the wife of one Commodore Jones of the Survey Service.)

These are the facts. Barbary was a poverty stricken world that could produce no worthwhile exports. Its people thought—as many people in like circumstances have thought in the past and will, no doubt, think in the future—that they were somehow entitled to a share of the luxury goods manufactured on other, more prosperous planets of the Galaxy, goods that they could never afford to import in the normal way.

Sooner or later it had to happen—and it did. There was an unholy alliance between a group of unscrupu-

lous businessmen, an equally unscrupulous space captain, and a physicist who was amoral rather than unscrupulous, who was a near genius in his field and who didn't care how his brain children were used as long as they were used.

So it was that the first of the latter day Barbary Corsairs lifted from Port Barbary. As far as outside appearances went she differed not at all from the standard star tramp of those days, being just a typical Interstellar Transport Commission's *Epsilon* Class ship sold to private owners with the onset of obsolescence. Inside the tarnished, pitted hull she was not so typical. In her control room was a Mass Proximity Indicator far superior to any such instrument then in use in the Survey Service. The controls of her Mannschenn Drive unit had been modified so that they would, as it were, lock on to the field of any other interstellar drive unit within a range of a thousand miles and then match temporal precession to half a micro-second. Two of her sponsons did not house boats but, instead, concealed quick-firing cannon.

Her first—and her last—

cruise was successful. She haunted the space lanes between Caribbea and Van Die-men's Planet, pounced upon the unfortunate *Creole Moon* and perforated her from stem to stern with the quickfirers—carefully avoiding, however, the cargo compartments, concentrating upon control and engine rooms and the accommodation. When the boarding party burned their way in they found nobody living to oppose them. They found, too, a cargo of rum, spider silk, canned sea beef (esteemed by gourmets throughout the Galaxy) and the rainbow pearls for which Caribbea is justly famous. The cargo they transferred to their own ship. Then, having withdrawn all the dampers from *Creole Moon's* pile, they hastily departed, secure in the knowledge that the flare of atomic energy would destroy all evidence of their crime.

The pirate — she was named, unimaginatively, *Joshua K. Higginbotham*—was fitting out for her next cruise when her second mate, an officer overly sensitive and, furthermore, the man who had been in charge of the boarding party that forced entry into the literally bloody hulk, tried to drown his mem-

ories in the rum that he, himself, had brought to Barbary and, under the influence of that spirit, babbled enough to arouse the interest of a reporter from the *Barbary Times and Courier* who was a customer of the same tavern. The reporter heard enough to give him some inkling of what must have happened and ran at once to his editor with the story. The editor was, at the time, funning for Joshua K. Higginbotham and his associates—there had been some sort of squabble over advertising rates—and engaged a private inquiry agent to make further investigations. The private eye discovered enough to send him to the police. The police, who were not overly fussy about the methods they used, discovered a lot more.

Cutting a long story short, there was a trial, and there were several hangings—but there was no publicity. Barbary had dealt with her own criminals in her own way and saw no reason why the news of her shame should be spread over the Galaxy. Furthermore, an interesting thought had occurred to the Hereditary President and his ministers. They had enjoyed their share of the “imported” luxuries—and the rum had

tasted no less sweet, the spider silk had been no less soft, the sea beef no less delicious and the rainbow pearls no less radiant for having been bought with blood.

Piracy was a crime—but what of bloodless piracy? After all, Lloyd's of London would make good any financial losses incurred by shipper, shipowner or consignee—and whoever heard of an insurance organization going broke? There is no compensation for loss of life—but if no lives are lost, what does it matter? Nobody has *really* lost anything—excepting, perhaps, Lloyd's, and they can always increase their premiums. It would have to be well organized, of course. No suspicion must ever fall upon the planet of Barbary, there must be nothing to invite police action by the Federation. Still, it was possible.

So it was that Captain Bartholemew Perkins followed in the steps of both his father and his grandfather and became a professional pirate. It was an honorable profession, just as it had been in the England of the first Elizabeth. It was all part of the justifiable revolt of the Have-Nots against the Haves. It was all in the Robin Hood

tradition. (It is strange that none of the sea-robbers seem ever to have been actuated by the same altruistic motives as their counterparts on dry land . . .)

Black Joke was the name of his ship, but it was displayed only when she was standing in her berth at Port Barbary. In Space she had another name, but nobody could read it; the characters looked like an attempt made by a drunken Arab to scrawl Chinese ideographs with a broad paint brush. She had started her career as *Delta Leonis*, in the Commission's service, some many years before she was, after several changes of ownership, purchased by the Barbary Shipping Company—but she looked nothing like a *Delta* Class vessel once she was in deep space. When she was clear of the atmosphere a false stem added a hundred feet to her length and she bristled with antennae, with fittings that could have been rocket launchers and other fittings that looked like vicious cannon of some alien design; the over-all effect was that of a spacegoing porcupine. She carried the Mass Proximity Indicator invented by that scientist who had hanged with his fellow pi-

rates, also the modified Mannschenn Drive controls. She carried other equipment that had been invented and designed since that first, bloody attempt at piracy.

Black Bart was happy in his work. There was in his make-up much of the small boy—the small boy who plays at pirates. If he had any regrets they were that so few of the pirated ships put up even a token resistance, and also that he had to operate anonymously. To have been known as Black Bart, the Scourge of the Spaceways, would have been deeply satisfying—but that, he knew, could never be.

Black Joke was making a routine voyage. She had cleared from Port Barbary with empty holds but, according to the Customs records, was bound for Faraway with a cargo of woollen cloth and glassware. (No Federation snoopers had visited Barbary yet, but there could always be a first time.) Black Bart had no specific orders. The Port Barbary warehouses, although not full to bursting, were far from empty and there was no present or impending shortage of any one commodity. Bart, therefore, decided to haunt the lanes between the Solarian and Centaurian Sys-

tems. He maintained that only on Earth was there distilled any liquor worth drinking and, besides, had rather more than half promised a genuine Terran tea set to his old mother some time ago.

Most of the time between Barbary and a position roughly midway between Sol and Rigil Kentaurus was occupied by rehearsals. Black Bart and his men had parts to play, and their continued success and the continued safety of their home planet depended largely upon the way in which they played those parts. After each rehearsal there was a meeting in which the entire crew took part, criticisms and suggestions being made and noted.

They were all of them there, gathered in the ship's lounge, looking, thought their captain ruefully, more like a gathering of clerks than one of bloody pirates—but when piracy was put on a business footing, what else could one expect? The last rehearsal had gone without a hitch, however, and Black Bart hoped that the meeting would be a short one. He wanted to get back to his reading of an excellent biography of one Captain Kidd, although Bart rather disapproved of the attempts made by the writer to

whitewash the character of that notorious privateer turned pirate.

"That seems to be all," he said. "Carry on, men."

"There's one other matter," said the mate, looking like an accountant who has found an error of two and a half cents in the firm's books. "There's one other matter, Captain."

"Yes, Mr. Crane?" asked Bart.

"We haven't yet decided what we do if those rumors are true—the rumors that the Federation ships are being fitted with some instantaneous signalling device."

"I think," replied his captain, "that we can assume that they are just that, and nothing more. There is a definite limit to the speed of light, of any radiation. You just can't fit a quantum with a submicroscopic Mannschenn Drive unit that will take it outside and around the normal Space-Time Continuum, as a ship is taken. No, Mr. Crane, nothing—and I mean nothing—will ever be able to outrun an interstellar ship."

"The rumors," averred the mate, "have been very persistent."

"So," said Bart, "have been the rumors that the Federation is going to arm its merchantmen. And that they'll

never do. The dividing line between the armed merchantman and the pirate is too thin—as *we* know.”

His officers, with the exception of Crane, sniggered dutifully.

Bart dismissed them, returned to his own quarters, to his microfilm and scanner, thinking rather sadly that in the far-off days of Captain Kidd pirates *were* pirates.

By ship's time it was six days later that *Black Joke* fell in with her victim. Bart picked her up, first of all, on his Mass Proximity Indicator—an instrument that, unlike radar, worked with a fine disregard for such trivialities as temporal precession. Even with no visual sighting Bart learned enough about her for his immediate requirements. Her tonnage indicated that she was an *Epsilon* Class freighter with a full cargo. The elements of her trajectory showed that she was bound from the Solarian System to the planets of Rigil Kentaurus.

Slowly, on a converging course, *Black Joke* closed the other ship. While she did so her captain and certain of his crew clambered into their costumes—the fantastic uniforms with the weird attach-

ments, the odd-looking gloves, the masks. Sparks busied himself with the ship's transmitter, making sure that it would transmit a blurred image to the vision plate in the merchantman's control room. Crane, using the scanner fitted for that purpose, inspected every inch of *Black Joke's* external skin, making sure that the disguise was not faulty in any smallest detail. When he was satisfied he went to his station at the pirate's single gun.

This, thought Black Bart, is like submarine warfare in the old days of sea battles. We can see them—with our instruments—but they can't see us. As soon as I lock the temporal precession fields they will see us, almost right alongside them—and then the panic will start . . .

“Close enough,” he said aloud. Then, into the microphone of the intercom, “Lock!”

“Lock!” the reply of the Interstellar drive engineer crackled from the speaker.

Suddenly the other ship was there, a dim, black shape against the blurred distortions that were the stars.

“Fire!” snapped Bart.

“Fire!” came Crane's acknowledgment.

The shell burst ahead of the

merchantman. In actuality it was harmless, little more than a spectacular pyrotechnic, but it looked deadly. By its lurid, persistent light Bart could make out that his victim was, indeed, an *Epsilon* Class tramp. He wondered how his own ship would look in the light of that same shell, and was certain that she would appear both fantastic and terrifying.

The other's outline quivered, faded—then steadied again. Bart grinned. He knew what the Commission's captain was trying to do; he was attempting to shake off the pirate by varying his rate of temporal precession. With the fields of the two drives locked, this was impossible, as was a reversion to normal Space-Time and the use of rocket drive. There was no escape for the tramp.

"I've got them," said Sparks.

The vision plate lighted up, revealed the interior of a typical control room—as typical a control room as *Black Joke's* had been until the banks of dummy instruments, of meters and gauges had been set up. The other captain was facing the screen. His face was pale, but not afraid.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "What ship?"

"We are the Queeg," replied Bart, knowing that, thanks to Sparks' skill, his voice would sound in the other's ears with unearthly undertones and overtones. "We are the Queeg. Who are you?"

"It's none of your damned business, you . . . you stinking reptile!"

"All that happens in Space is our business," stated Bart. "We are the Queeg. We are the Lords of Space. He who passes through our domain must pay tribute."

"Tribute!" snarled the merchant captain. "Blackmail, you mean. And what if we refuse to pay?"

Bart was becoming interested in two officers in the background—the mate and the radioman. They seemed to be arguing about something. Straining his ears, he caught the urgent whisper, "Where is the wench? Where is she? Just when we want her she goes to powder her nose!"

"I'm not her keeper," muttered the Terran Sparks sullenly.

"She's a member of your department."

"She's not."

The secret communications device? wondered Bart.

"Answer me," rasped the tramp master. "What if we refuse to pay?"

"You consider yourself a civilized being," replied the pirate. "If you do not value your own life you will value the lives of your people."

"Mirgon shree!" said Crane through the intercom, and Bart knew that all the guns and projectors, still visible in the slowly dying glow of that first projectile, were now trained upon the tramp.

Bart saw the Terran officers huddled in anxious conference. He gave them time to talk things over, then growled, "We are the Queeg. We demand to know what ship, where from and where to. Answer."

"*Epsilon Ceti*," came the reply. "Terra to Cheiron."

"What is your cargo?"

"Scotch whisky. China-ware. Books. Films."

"Stand by to receive boarders. We shall be pleased to take our dues from your cargo."

"Has nobody ever called the bluff of these animals?" demanded *Epsilon Ceti's* captain of nobody in particular.

"They've got guns, sir," pointed out his mate, "and we haven't."

"All right. Open up the airlock. Let them take whatever

they want. Let them take that useless she-devil as well if she's any good to them. They might make a meal of her."

"You have a female prisoner on board your ship?" asked Bart.

"No. Certainly not. You'll see what we have soon enough."

"Prepare to welcome us," ordered the pirate.

Bart, as always, felt a fool in his spacesuit—although, as had often been pointed out, it was better to be inside than outside one. The tanks inside the hump at the back—the hump that was designed to look as though it accommodated a pair of wings—released an occasional acrid whiff of ill smelling gases, conveying the impression that the Queeg could not make airtight suits and that they lived on a world with a chlorine atmosphere. The hump also housed the little motor that swished the tail realistically as the wearer of the suit pulled himself from handhold to handhold, twitched it at random intervals when he was at rest. There were the six-fingered gloves to manage—but Bart was well practiced in their use. There was the goldfish bowl type helmet, polarized to allow of outward vision only.

Epsilon Ceti's people also

wore spacesuits. The big cargo doors had been opened so that the hold, sealed off from the rest of the ship, had lost its atmosphere to the vacuum of space. Both ships, of course, had shut down their Mannschenn Drives—any loss of mass whilst the Drive is in operation will lead to disastrous and unforeseeable consequences. There was no danger that some suicidal engineer aboard the tramp would restart her Drive—the improved field locking device aboard *Black Joke* made that impossible.

All of the pirates were silent save Black Bart. He was careful to couch his orders on his suit radio in such a way that they would be understood by his own crew as well as by the Terrans. His crew were so well drilled, however, that unobtrusive gestures sufficed in lieu of words—all of which, hoped Bart, would give support to the legend that the Queeg were a telepathic race.

From *Black Joke*'s cargo doors extended the endless whips of light, glittering chain. From ship to ship flowed the stream of crates, cases and bales. Work that would have taken days on a planetary surface, in a gravitational field, here took hours only—even so, it was not easy

work. Black Bart was far from sorry when the last case was hooked on; it was, he saw, marked CHINA, FRAGILE. He thought of his mother and the promised tea service. He said, ostensibly addressing his words to the tramp's mate, "It is the custom of the Queeg that the last article of tribute is the property of the lord of the starship."

"You can take it," replied the mate, "and . . ."

"Almost all things are possible to the Queeg," said Bart, "but even we have our limitations."

"Have you finished?" asked the Terran wearily. "Are you sure that you wouldn't like our toothbrushes or our dirty socks?"

"They would be of no use to us," Bart told him, "otherwise we would take them." He watched his men dismantling the whip. "Farewell, Terran. Tell your fellow animals on the worlds that they infest that great is the power of the Queeg."

Back aboard his own ship he went straight to the control room, took charge of the breaking away operations, swinging *Black Joke* on her gyroscopes until she was headed in the general direction of the Lesser Magellanic Cloud. There would be time

enough to put her on her true trajectory when she was out of sight and ken of the Earthmen. He waited until his people were all in the specially designed chairs and couches, then gave the vessel a burst of acceleration that would convey the impression that the Queeg were a very rugged race indeed. When she was well clear of *Epsilon Ceti* he cut the rockets and switched over to Interstellar Drive, setting it for randomly variable temporal precession.

He had carried out his duties efficiently, now he could relax. He decided that he would emulate the pirates of the past, the real pirates, and ordered that the case of chinaware that he had said was his own personal loot be brought to his cabin. He helped himself to screwdrivers from the control room tool chest, handed the ship over to the mate and went to his quarters.

Before he did anything else he stripped off what he referred to as his fancy dress, got into an old, shabby and comfortable uniform. He stowed the Queeg spacesuit in its locker. He filled and lit his foul, ancient pipe, and decided that the next item on the agenda was the investigation

of the tobacco looted from the merchantman. He corrected himself. "The next item but one," he muttered.

He looked at the case, which had been lashed to one of the stanchions in his cabin. He frowned as he read again the word FRAGILE. How fragile? he wondered. Would it contain Japanese eggshell china, and would it now be no more than crumbling shards? The acceleration *had* been rather heavy . . . But china could mean *anything*, anyhow. Perhaps the case did not contain tea services after all—or the remains of tea services. Perhaps it contained one of those monstrous vases—or the wreckage of one. Perhaps it contained something really ludicrous—it was said that the Centaurian worlds were remarkably backward in sanitary engineering.

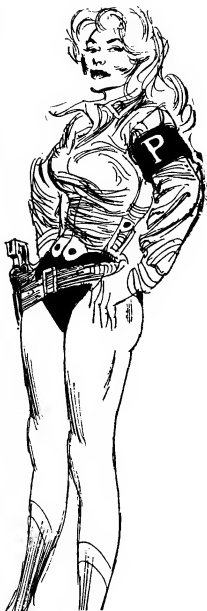
The use of a screwdriver in Free Fall is not easy. To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction—and that law does not apply only to rockets. The use of a screwdriver in Free Fall should not be easy—but, in this case, it was. The screws were no more than dummies, their thread not engaging the sides of the holes into which they had been inserted. But something was holding the lid of

the big box from inside. Bart tugged at it and swore—then hastily let go of it as he heard a sinister scrabbling inside the big case. A booby trap? he thought—and had visions of some ravening, indestructible beast that would turn his ship into a shambles. He jumped towards the big safe that filled one end of his day room, the safe that housed, behind the inviolability of its combination lock, the ship's firearms.

Half-way through dialling the combination Bart turned his head, looked back to the mysterious box. The lid was open now, and something was emerging from its interior. Something? No, somebody—somebody wearing a Commission pattern spacesuit. One after the other, the gauntlets were drawn from the slim white hands and left to float in the air. Those hands went up to the helmet, gave it a half turn, sent it to join the gloves.

Bart stared at the face revealed—the pale face of a girl who would never, who could never be pretty but who was, in spite of the trickle of dried blood running down from one corner of her wide, full-lipped mouth, somehow beautiful.

The green eyes focussed on



Bart. The husky voice said, "Was it necessary for you to get away from the poor old *Wandering Whale* like a bat out of hell, Captain Perkins? I'm lucky that my bones are still whole."

"Call me Black Bart," said Bart automatically.

"Oh, yes. Black Bart, the Scourge of the Spaceways. I was forgetting. But where are your manners, Black Bart? Is this the way that you greet a lady aboard your pirate ship? I always thought that gentlemen pirates had a reputation for gallantry. Aren't you going to help me off with this suit? Aren't you going to offer me a drink? And a smoke—although I hope it's something better than whatever it is that you've been smoking. The fumes of it are worse than the slow trickle of chlorine and such from that comic suit of yours . . ."

Bart coped with the fastenings of the girl's suit. She emerged from it like a butterfly from its chrysalis. She was wearing the shorts and shirt uniform of the Commission, and the shorts were of less than regulation length, which was not a pity, and the shirt was nicely filled. The insignia on her epaulettes were

strange to the captain—a golden P on the black cloth. He'd never seen it.

Bart helped the girl to a chair, strapped her in. He knew, somehow, that she would not talk any more until refreshed, so he went to his liquor cabinet and, after a moment's hesitation, got out two bulbs of brandy. He handed one to her, watched as she put the nipple to her mouth, as she squeezed the container between her hands.

"I needed that," she said, the color returning to her face.

"And what," demanded Bart, "are you doing aboard my ship?"

"I want to join you," she said.

"And what if we had been the *Queeg*?" asked Bart. "What if you'd removed your helmet and found yourself choking in an atmosphere of chlorine?"

"I knew," she told him, "that there was no danger of that."

"You knew? Does the Federation government know?"

"Of course not. But I know. And what I know, and what I am, will buy me high rank in your government's service."

"There is such a thing," said Bart heavily, "as going

out through the airlock without a spacesuit."

She laughed. "I know you too well, Black Bart, to take that seriously. I know that you read stories about the old-time pirates making their victims walk the plank—but you'd never do it. You couldn't."

"Who are you?" exploded the captain. "*What* are you?"

"My name," she said sweetly, "is Sarah Glanville. I was, until recently, P.R.O. aboard *Epsilon Ceti* . . ."

"P.R.O.? Public Relations Officer? In a *tramp*?"

"You're behind the times, Black Bart. P.R.O. no longer means Public Relations Officer—not in Space it doesn't."

"Then what does it mean?"

"I'd like some more brandy," she said. "Can't you see that this bulb is empty?" Black Bart obliged. After she had taken a drink from the fresh bulb she went on, "P.R.O. means Psionics Communications Officer. The bright young girls and boys from the Rhine Institute. The telepaths—each with his or her dog's brain tissue culture amplified in its nutrient bath. (I'm sorry that I couldn't bring Fido with me; he'll be pining badly . . .) The human transceivers who can punch a message clear across the Gal-

axy with no time lag whatsoever. Yes—the rumors that your Mr. Crane heard—and that you scoffed at—were rather more than rumors. And the P.R.O.s are going to put the Barbary Corsairs out of business."

Bart sucked at his drink, thinking. He said at last, "I can see that. One of your people aboard a pirated ship—and our masquerade is exposed for the fake it is, and the Federation's police cruisers will know that Barbary is the pirates' nest. So why do you want to join us? The racket can't last much longer." He paused. "Or were you planted here as a spy, or as a sort of psionic beacon? How do I know that there's not a cruiser on my tail?"

"There's not," she said, and Bart believed her. "As for the racket's not lasting much longer—it could carry on for a while yet, with my help. After all—so far there's only a limited supply of P.R.O.s, and it'll be a while before the Institute turns out enough graduates to meet the demand. As I said—I'll buy my way in."

"How?" asked Bart.

"It should be obvious, even to you—but I can see it's not. I stay with this ship. She is

stalking some poor, defenseless merchantman. I shall know whether or not she carries a telepath—if she does, we sheer off, fast, before she can pick anything up. If she doesn't—we pounce."

"You almost convince me," he admitted.

"Almost!" she scoffed. "If you could read my mind as well as I can read yours . . ." She smiled, and there was something about her expression that made Bart shudder. "But you can't."

Carefully Bart filled his pipe. "All right. You're a telepath. You've given me enough proof of that. For some reason you want to become a pirate—well, there have been women pirates. You are willing to sell your services to the Government of Barbary. You know that piracy will be finished so soon as every Commission ship carries a P.R.O.—yet you still want to join us. Why?"

She smiled again. "Let us say that I have my reasons. And, after all, it is not only small boys like Black Bart who dream dreams of piracy. Women—some women—have their dreams as well . . ."

"I believe that you really do want to become one of us," exclaimed Bart.

"What have I been trying to tell you for the past half hour?" she countered.

And what a comrade she will make! thought Bart. A true pirate's mate. How different from the vapid, giggling wenches who sit at home on their fat fannies and wait for a lion's share of the spoils that they have not helped to win!

Very desirable she looked sitting there, very accessible. Her eyes met his candidly and he read promise in them. He reached out to the nearer arm of her chair, pulled himself towards her. His lips touched hers. He started to put his arms about her—and recoiled violently as her sharp nails scored his cheeks.

"Before you try that again," she said coldly, "take that filthy thing off your face."

In the best pirate ship tradition there was a full meeting of the crew to discuss matters. Black Bart was half afraid that some of his men would be in favor of murdering Sarah Glanville—half afraid and yet, at the same time, half hopeful. There was something about her that he didn't like—and it was much more than the slighting way in which she had spoken of his beard — something of

which, although he wouldn't admit it, he was frightened. He was attracted still—as was every man aboard the ship. He was attracted and repelled at the same time. Almost he supported Crane's motion that the girl be killed at once, without ceremony; almost he forgot to be shocked by the cold ferocity displayed by the mild, clerkish man—so he had always, until now, thought—who was his chief officer.

Sarah Glanville, a slight smile playing over her mobile mouth, waited until the other pirates, shocked to righteous indignation, had shouted the mate's proposal down. She addressed herself to that officer.

"Mr. Crane," she said, "it is obvious that you spoke without thinking—a typical male practice. I suggest that you think, and that you think on these lines. You know what I am. You know, too, that death is never absolutely instantaneous. No matter how you kill me, I shall have time to transmit a message. I shall tell every fellow telepath within my far from limited range just who the Queeg are, where they come from and what they are doing to me. Such citizens of Barbary as survive the Federation's puni-

tive action will curse your name."

"She's right, Crane," said Bart, puffing his evil pipe.

"She's right," chorused the others.

"You've got me," she said. "You can't lose me. You'll have to make the best of me—and you all know that I shall be more of a help than a hindrance."

And that was the way of it.

She travelled to Barbary as a privileged passenger, a spare cabin having been fitted out for her. She held herself aloof from all *Black Joke's* crew, even from Black Bart, even though he shaved off his precious beard after the deep scratches that she had inflicted upon his face had healed. It is hard, if not impossible, to make advances to a woman who knows what you will say and do long before you say and do it. She was respected, she was feared, and she was desired as men will always desire the unattainable.

It was after *Black Joke's* landing at Port Barbary that the real flap started. Black Bart had committed the unforgivable sin—he had taken a prisoner, had, by so doing, jeopardized the entire socioeconomic structure of Barbary. He was summoned

forthwith to the palace of the Hereditary President, there to account for his actions. He told his story and it was not believed. Sarah Glanville told her story—and that was not believed either—at first. She, however, was able to give a quite convincing exhibition of her powers, so convincing that the President and his Ministers decided that only by making use of her talents could the Barbary Corsairs hope to stay in business.

Fast scouts were sent to recall those units of the pirate fleet out in Space—should any of them tangle with a merchantman with a Psionic Radio Officer among her crew the results might well be disastrous. Barbary's leading psychologists were ordered to scour the planet for telepaths. And *Black Joke* was refitted for her next cruise.

When she lifted from Port Barbary the training program for the Barbary Corsairs' own Psionic Radio Officers was already in full swing—but Sarah Glanville was not staying on the planet to direct this. She was in *Black Joke*, and her rating was not that of a mere communications officer. She ranked with, but slightly above, Black Bart himself. In some ways the

set-up was analagous to that in the old sailing men-o'-war—when it came to taking the ship from Point A to Point B the sailing master was in full charge; when it came to a battle the captain's authority was supreme, just as Sarah Glanville's would be as soon as the pirate fell in with a merchantman.

Black Bart made no pretense of liking the situation. He stayed in his cabin almost all the time and made heavy inroads into his liquor store. He knew that the girl was undermining his authority. He had reason to suspect that she was not niggardly with her favors and that Crane, his mate, was among those whose allegiance had been bought with woman's currency. And it had been Crane, he thought bitterly, rubbing his fingers over the stubble of his regrowing beard, who had voted for her murder . . .

For all of six weeks *Black Joke* cruised between the Solarian and Sirian Systems, a sector of Space in which she had made rich hauls in the past. No less than four times the Mass Proximity Indicator gave warning of the approach of another vessel, and no less than four times Sarah Glanville, wearing the rapt expression that Bart had come

to hate, said, "No, Captain Perkins. No. She is maintaining a Psionic Radio watch. Once her operator picks up intelligible signals from the minds of you and your crew the game is up."

"What about your mind?" demanded Bart.

She turned upon him the superior smile that all women have at their command. She said, "The trained telepath can not only transmit, but can shut off the transmitter at will. All of you are low grade transmitters that cannot be shut off."

Then contact was made with a fifth ship.

This time the girl did not veto further action. She strapped herself into a chair in the control room, talked to Bart as though he were a human being instead of some life form almost beneath contempt.

She said, "I'm receiving her. There are none of us aboard, but I can pick up the thoughts of her crew. Her name, I think, is . . ." She frowned. "It can't be. But it seems like *Spotted Dog* . . ."

"It could be," said Bart. "There's a small local line runs out from the Sirian worlds, and all their ships are named after various breeds

of hound. There's *Alsation*—I pirated her a couple of years back. There's *Mastiff*, and there's *Pomeranian*. There could be a *Dalmatian*."

"There could," she agreed. "And if there is, her crew will call her by the more familiar name. I can't get any details of her cargo—if somebody were actually thinking about it, I could."

"The Sirian worlds are prosperous," Bart told her. "Whatever she has in her holds will be worth taking."

"And she'll have plenty for me," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind," she almost whispered—and the expression on her face told Bart that he should mind.

"You're sure that she's safe?" he demanded sharply.

"Of course she's safe," she assured him.

"If she's not . . ." he began.

". . . you'll push me out through the airlock without a spacesuit," she finished. "But you wouldn't, Black Bart. You couldn't. If you'd lived in the good old days that you're always reading about you'd never have had anybody keel-hauled, you'd never have hanged anybody from the yardarm, you'd never have made anybody walk the plank. You might have finished up

in Execution Dock, though . . . You're only a make-believe pirate, Black Bart. Why, there were women in the old days who were more of pirates than you could ever have been—come to that, than any man could ever have been. What was it that the old poet—it was Rudyard or some such name—said? 'The female of the species is deadlier than the male . . .'

He ignored this. "If this is a trap," he growled, "and if you're a Federation spy . . ."

"This is not a trap, and if I were a Federation spy the police cruisers would have blasted hell out of Barbary long since. But this is all so very typical of you. Instead of preparing to board and loot you're wasting time arguing."

With an effort, Bart refrained from further words, concentrated upon his instruments, jockeyed *Black Joke* closer and ever closer to the oblivious *Dalmatian*. He was aware that the other officers had come into the control room, all wearing their Queeg disguises. Convincing they might look when viewed by the medium of deliberately fogged television; at close range, seen by natural vision, they seemed no more real and

hardly less comical than a pantomime horse.

Bart handed the controls over to Crane. He said to the girl, "If you want to see the fun from here you'd better get dressed up."

"If you say so," she said. "But I don't think it's necessary."

"I do," he snapped. "Either you get into a Queeg disguise or keep out of the way."

"All right," she replied sullenly, "*Captain*."

Bart didn't like the look—half smile, half sneer—that flickered over Crane's face. The mate was not disguised. When visual contact was made with the Sirian ship he would be in his fire control station.

Bart went to his room, put on the garish uniform, the hideous mask, the six-fingered gloves, the wings that were not designed to give him an angelic appearance. He slipped into the master control chair as the mate vacated it, ordered, "Stand by your artillery, Mr. Crane." He saw Sarah Glanville return to control—and on her the disguise didn't look like a disguise at all. *She's willing all of us to believe that she really is one of the Queeg*, he thought. *Telepathic projection?*

The whining song of *Black Joke's* Mannschenn Drive

unit changed key suddenly and subtly as she locked fields with *Dalmatian*, as the pirate's own temporal precession field was briefly extended to cover the sector of Space which the warning shell from her single gun would traverse, in which it would burst. Black Bart gave the order to fire. The shell blossomed in the blackness, throwing into plain view the long, sleek ship with the stylized insigne of a white, polka-dotted dog prancing on her bow.

There was the usual slight delay before radio contact was established. Then, "We are the Queeg . . ." growled Black Bart, hamming through the familiar routine. "We are the Lords of Space. Who passes through our domain must pay tribute . . ."

When the preliminaries were over he went to his cabin to put on his Queeg spacesuit. He was pulling it out of its locker when, suddenly, he was aware that he was not alone. He dropped the suit, turned. He saw Sarah Glanville, and with her, Crane. Both of them were holding Minetti automatics, and both of them looked as though they knew how to use them.

"What do you want?" he blustered.

"We want the guns from

the safe," said Crane. "The machine pistols, the gas grenades."

"I'll not open it," Bart replied quietly.

"Keep him covered, Peter," ordered the girl. "I know the combination."

If Crane misses with his first shot . . . thought Black Bart.

"On second thoughts," said the telepath, "I'll keep him covered. I can anticipate his every move. This is the combination, Peter. Knowing Black Bart, it's an obvious one. Jolly Roger. Got it?"

"Roger," replied Crane, grinning at his own joke.

Other members of the crew came in—the second mate, Sparks, the purser, the engineers. They took the arms that Crane handed out to them. Bart began to wonder how it was that he had ever thought of them as mild, clerkly men. He began to wonder how the lusts that are dormant in civilized beings had been aroused—and, looking at the witch girl (as he was beginning to think of her) he began to achieve a faint comprehension of the answer.

"Get into your suit," she ordered.

"But . . ."

"You are coming with us.

There is much that you have to learn, Black Bart . . ."

"But . . ."

"Help the captain on with his suit," she snapped.

They helped him on with his suit, roughly cramming him into the heavy armor, making all fast and tight, bound his arms and legs with a length of stout cord. They left him there for a while, hanging helpless and raging in his own cabin. He heard the whine of the Mannschenn Drive falter and fade, falter and die, knew that both ships were motionless in Space-Time and that boarding was now practicable. They came for him then, the men who had been his trusted officers, hauled him to the airlock, carried with them across the gulf between the ships.

Helpless, he had to watch what was being done. He saw *Dalmatian's* captain slammed against the instrument panel of his own control room by a burst from Sarah Glanville's Minetti, his ruptured belly spilling blood and torn intestines. He saw Crane and one of the engineers drag a struggling woman, the Sirian ship's purser, into a cabin, not waiting until they had her inside before they stripped the uniform from her. He

saw two of the Sirian officers jump to her assistance—and watched them shredded in mid-leap by a blast from his own second mate's machine pistol.

"You'll never get away with this!" he cried.

"Shan't we?" In spite of the tinniness imparted by the suit radio, Sarah Glanville's voice still possessed its husky quality. "Shan't we? And why shouldn't we, Black Bart?"

"I'll see to it that you swing," he promised.

"Brave words, Black Bart, Scourge of the Spaceways," she sneered. Her tone changed as she addressed the others. "If any more of you want to sample that washed-out blonde you'd better hurry. I haven't had *my* fun yet."

"We've got you, Sal!" shouted the second mate. "You'll do us."

"Thank you, kind sir. Then as soon as Crane and Digby have finished we'll dispose of the prisoners."

She divested herself of her spacesuit before this was done. Bart realized why—and the realization was sickening. The crew of *Dalmatian* would expect inhuman treatment by the mythical Queeg—but inhumanity, in this day and age, from fellow humans would be utterly shocking.

Shocking, too, was Sarah Glanville's expression as she watched the Sirians being dragged and prodded to the airlock, as she stared through the control room ports at the bloated, distorted bodies that circled the ship, slowly turning, like so many tiny satellites. *A vampire, thought Bart. A vampire, but feeding not on blood but on raw emotions, on the last, the ultimate fear.* He heard Crane make an obscene jest as the naked, no longer lovely body of the woman he had so briefly possessed drifted by. *And like the vampires of the old legends she's made vampires of my men,* he thought. *But perhaps the old pirates, the real pirates, were like this. Perhaps it was the opportunities for murder and rape that attracted them to piracy, not the treasure . . .*

Sarah Glanville's gauntleted hands went to his helmet, loosened the connections.

Faintly he could hear what she was saying.

"Captain Perkins was a rather careless man," she murmured. "He forgot to make sure that his helmet was tight sealed before he left the airlock. But we brought his body back as evidence and so that Barbary could honor one of her most prominent buccaneers with a state funeral . . ."

Black Bart knew that it was useless to argue, and he would not demean himself by pleading. He tried to remember, as men will try to remember the most trivial things at a crucial moment, the name of the old poet whom the girl had quoted, the man who had said that the female of the species was more deadly than the male. Kiplinger? Kipyard?

It didn't matter who had said it.

Applied to pirate or to telepath, it was true.

THE END





According to you...

Dear Editor:

In the June issue of *Fantastic* I found the short story "Blurble" by M. G. Zimmerman quite amusing and delightful. So different in content and light in style, yet with a definite focal point. This writer's imagination should deserve him honorable mention.

Anne Stevens
41-36 70th St.
Woodside, N. Y.

- *More than that. Money, too.*

Dear Editor:

I was browsing through the books at my favorite bookstore and lo, I came across an old friend, *Fantastic*. I must admit that I was pleasantly surprised to note that the letter column is still interesting. However, I was wondering what happened to Snarly Seibel who used to write such obnoxious letters to you and *Amazing*.

Watashi began reading science fiction in earnest one day after seeing a copy of your magazine on the stands back in Fairfax, Okla. The story that caught my 25 cents then was written by Ivar Jorgensen; all about a passionate Martian who gave birth to ants and was finally killed by a reformed Viking carrying a large golden cross. Oh, for the days of youthful wonder!

When you went digest size, your zine lost some of its flavor and the stories grew insipid. Now, thank Lovecraft, you have come alive with real fantastic, horror type stories.

I reckon Alma Hill is still putting in her two bits worth to keep you on the ball, and Greg Calkins of "OOpsla" too.

If Snarly Seibel should be reading this issue, I'd be interested in hearing from him again.

Bill Williams
505 W. Price Ave.
Springdale, Arkansas

• *Yoo-hoo, Snarly!! Where is everybody after all these years?*

Dear Editor:

I apologize for my remarks in the last letter. The May issue of *Fantastic* was terrific. I still say, though, that the April issue was very bad front to back.

The cover on May was splendid. By all means let's have more like it. It illustrated the story so well, too. You could have gotten a better artist—Finlay or somebody like that. It was good, though.

The editorial was interesting but what is it doing in a fantasy magazine? Of course s-f is a form of fantasy (although modern fans talk as though it were the other way around) but *Fantastic* is supposed to devote itself to the weird and occult form of fantasy.

Bloch's "The Hungry Eye" was splendid, reminiscent of the great H. P. Lovecraft. "Queen of the Green Sun" was terrific. This is a true fantasy story, of a kind most writers have forgotten how to write. It's a shame that such magnificent imagination must be wasted on a humorous story like this. How about an adventure story in the same type of crazy, mixed-up world?

"The Convention" and "The Only One That Lived" were excellent too. The other stories, though good for the most part, were s-f. I agree with those that think you should print an occasional s-f story, but I stress the word occasional. Why, with so many unused plots and ideas in fantasy and occult literature should you fill the magazine with s-f? (And usually bad s-f at that.)

Paul Zimmer
R. D. #1
East Greenbush, N. Y.

• *Apology accepted. And thanks for all the kind words, even if you don't like s-f.*

Dear Editor:

It is rather puzzling to me how you chaps who decide what's good enough to print can manage to select so much unreadable stuff and yet apparently be possessed of sufficiently good taste to publish stories by Jack Sharkey. May one assume that there just isn't much material of the quality he produces available, or what?

B. H. Custer
534 Broadway
San Francisco, Calif.

• *What puzzles us is how a reader can have the good taste to like Sharkey, and still call the rest of our excellent material "unreadable."*

Dear Editor:

Over a period of months, I have observed a striking change in the quality of stories in *Fantastic*. In fact, I'd say that the stories in the past several issues have been better than those in other magazines I've read (And that's quite a few.)

I particularly liked both the length and the number of stories in the June issue. Keep them that way.

As for the writers, I'm indeed glad that you have obtained the talents of Paul W. Fairman. That new guy Sharkey is great too.

I've just glanced at my futuristic ticker-tape and it says *Fantastic* has climbed up among the mythical "top three" in science fiction.

Jerry Gray
1405 24th St.
Jasper, Ala.

• *Give us a drag on that ticker-tape, will you?*

Dear Editor:

There are several stories in the June issue of *Fantastic* which I consider outstanding. These are "A Desert Incident" and "The Warren." In comparison, the other stories seem a bit weak, especially Paul W. Fairman's "Give Me My Body" and Rog Phillips' "The Lurker." Jack Sharkey executed what might be termed an average turn-about story.

Winston Marks can usually be relied on for well-turned fiction, and his "Cedric" is no exception. I don't know whether this story should be classified as fantasy, science fiction, a combination of both—or just plain fun. It was entertaining.

I still don't quite know what to make of Cordwainer Smith's writings. He writes so convincingly that one almost reads the following insert between the lines: "Listen to me now; this isn't fiction—this really happened" so that for the duration of one of his stories, the reader hangs suspended, or enthralled, unable to do much more than just let the story unwind itself.

All in all, this issue of *Fantastic* was a bit under par, but I'm confident, looking over the Coming Next Month, that the July issue is destined to reach new heights of excellence.

Bobby Gene Warner
745 Eldridge Street
Orlando, Florida

Dear Editor:

I have been reading s-f for one and a half years, and I have never written to an editor. When I read the July *Fantastic*, I decided that now is the time. To put it bluntly, it was the best one since May, 1958.

I liked "The 4-Sided Triangle" best. It would be all right with me if you put an oldie in each issue. Let's have some weird-horror like "The Creeper in the Dream" and "The Hungry Eye."

I think a lot of people will agree with me when I say that *Fantastic* is going up in the world.

Bob White
26 W. Normandy Dr.
West Hartford, Conn.

• *We agree with you, anyway.*

Dear Editor:

It seems to me that Mr. Doerr missed the point in his letter in the July issue of *Fantastic*. He quotes various reputable sources of information to prove to us that almost all of our leading scientists do not believe in any modern religion. However, he completely ignored the *why* end of the story. I'm no psychiatrist, but it appears to me that as Man evolved from

primitive forms of life, he faced problems that he felt he could not solve alone. There was no higher form of life for him to turn to, as dogs rely on us, so he invented a superman, whose body was anything that struck his (the man's) fancy. Each family had its own private god, and whenever a member of that particular family got discouraged they prayed to it.

Later, the more highly developed mind found it unnecessary to have a material god, so they prayed to a spiritual god.

However, some have progressed yet farther and have begun to rely on their own inner strength. Now our civilization has reached a crisis, a turning point on which depends the whole future of our race. Only time will tell whether we have the strength to go on, outward to the stars, by ourselves.

Frank Obits

Dear Editor:

Of all the fantastic *fiction*, the truly fantastic—yet possible—"mind-matters" are being ignored, yet are occurring to real people all over this world. I speak of clairvoyance, mental-telepathy, spirit-travel, possession, re-incarnation, poltergeists, and more, all the things possible of a living human mind.

Are fiction writers afraid of the "mind-matters?"

Mrs. C. B. D. Nicholas

560 N. Lavergne Ave.

Northlake, Illinois

• *No, they are not. See "Solution Tomorrow" in this very issue.*

Dear Editor:

"The Last Plea" was fairly interesting and I believe one of the best stories that Robert Bloch has ever written. How about another one of them this year, if possible?

James W. Ayers

609 First St.

Attalla, Ala.

• *If you can hold out long enough, our Sister magazine, Amazing, will have a complete novel by Bloch in its November issue.*

MAIDENS FOR THE CENOTE

By JESS SHELTON



The old gods never die . . . they do not even fade away, if you are of the ancient race, from the ancient place . . .

FORTIE was strange, the half-Irish from his old man making him a laugher, but deep down more than a laugher. From his mother's side it was worse than that. Maybe I shouldn't talk about him, not with Xolotl and Quetzalcoatl and Xiuhcoatl the fire monster hovering in my soul, their great wings flapping, their feathered serpentine bodies . . . It began—my first awareness of it—that night Fortie and I had been to this place in the Patch in south St. Louis where some girls from

the university were throwing a party. Fortie and I looked at each other when the party was sagging. He whispered, "Let's go do something by the trains, Pete."

I said, "Vamonos," which means "OK, good old buddy, let's slip this noose."

We crossed the lot in front of this girl's house and walked down the tracks toward the big coke ovens. We could feel the heat a half block away: it undulated and warped red and yellow through the darkness, slapped us in the face with its

hands, and then like a hot woman drew us closer until we stopped to watch the train pull up so the loading cars were under the ovens. My Uncle Joe's cousin, Pepe Gonzalez, was the engineer. I waved at him and started to say "*Com' esta?*" but he pulled down his eyebrows and shook his head, as if he didn't want to see her.

It was crazy.

"What's wrong with . . ." I said; then I noticed Fortie. His face seemed drawn in the wavering orange glow from the furnaces, and his mouth was partly open, his straight white teeth set on edge as he stared at the locomotive, which was hissing as if the smashing blocks of white-hot coke pouring into the segments of its serpentine body were too overpowering.

"You know something, pa-chook," he said. I'm queer on trains."

The word "queer" made me think about a lot of things. *He just means he likes trains*, I tried to tell myself. But deep down in my brain a little voice repeated: *Why "queer"? Why in the hell "queer"?*

He said, "I got a monkey on my back, but it's trains. They spook me. I get something wound up tight in me

and I want to go lay down under them and—and . . ."

"You're crocked," I told him.

"No," he said. "You look. Furnace fifteen'll miss, and the coke'll splatter all over the yard and start a fire."

"You're crazy," I said. "The car's right in line."

"Just wait and see, Pedro-cito." I watched him for a minute. *Si, amigo*, I said to myself: *you're drunk*. And Fortie said, "You just think I am."

I shivered.

Furnace fifteen was beginning to empty now. In less than ten seconds the coke would smash into chunks in the empty steel car. I grinned at it and began to feel relieved. Nothing would happen.

Then the train lurched forward, with a squealing of brakes and a shouting and hoarse cursing from the men standing goggled on the catwalk above, from Pepe Gonzalez the engineer and from the brawny German fireman in the locomotive cab.

The block—tons of coke—shivered momentarily in the air, slapping out heat like a fire-breathing monster, and it broke, rolling across tracks and surging into the wall of the tool shack. The shack collapsed, fire hit the gas cans,

and flames rolled forty feet into the night.

Dumbly I stood there, like a little Indian kid coming face to face with the kind of beast he dreams of. Fortie asked, *Do you want to see more?* The words were neither English nor Spanish. They were the old language. Mama and Papa and Rafael knew it; I didn't know till then that I knew it, that it was part of me, too.

I worked to spit up my voice: "Move it?" I said. "Move it again?" But when I turned to him, I saw that I was alone.

Shaking, with snakes running up my spine, I raced over to Pepe Gonzalez. "Hey, Pepe!" I shouted. "*Que ha ocurrido?*"

He had been running alongside his black locomotive, tapping wheels with his hand, kicking at rods, checking nuts and oil caps. He turned slowly, his squarish Mexican Indian face red in the firelight. "What you say?"

"Hey, it's me—Pedro! You know me!"

He looked like a ceremonial mask, brows curved up, nostrils flared, mouth twisted. "Go back, you!" he hissed at me.

"Are you crazy? It's me, Pedrocito! *Tiene mal?*"

"I didn't do nothing to it!

You and that other thing did it!"

"Did what?"

"You used to throw girls in the cenote, long time ago, you . . . *Madre de Dios, perdoneme!*" I had never seen him act like that before. He was scared, deadly horrified, and all I could do was stand and stare at him as the fire trucks sirened up. "You." He leveled his arm at me. "You go find that thing with you, and you make it stop this!"

I stared at the crazy man for a moment longer before I turned around and stumbled along the tracks in the darkness. It was midnight by now. The sounds of the firemen and of the crackling flames of the burning railroad sheds dimmed out behind me as I walked along the tracks but the light from the fires remained to push forward my grotesquely flickering shadow.

Worry was a bloodclot in my brain, throbbing with its own pain. Pepe was insane. And it was like Fortie to think he had caused it, when it was merely some slipping of the locomotive's brakes. (But Fortie knew . . .)

I saw the bird then. At first I thought that I saw it in the air, in the darkness, and I thought it was some really big

bird, or maybe a smaller bird that looked bigger because of the shadows from the fire. It hovered up there, above me and ahead of me its bright eyes piercing at me, and then I saw its body of feathered silver, its talons which were not actually the claws of a winged beast, but more like hands. Its face—I shook my head at it, forced a laugh which hurt my throat, and walked faster. Then it was gone. I began to run.

I was sweating when I closed the kitchen door behind me.

"Pedro, you got sickness?" Mama's brown face was anxious.

I shook my head. "No, Mama. *No tengo mal.*"

"You sit down," she ordered me. "I get you some coffee."

I grinned at her. Fat, worried, brown-faced, proud of Papa and Rafael and Angel and her grown-up baby, Pedro. "*Todos los indios beben cafe,*" I tried to joke.

She shook her cheeks angrily. "We're *norteamericanos*, not Indians!"

"We can't stop being *indios*, Mama."

"We're Americans now!"

"All right *mamacita!*"

She turned from the stove, held her dark eyes on me for

a while. "Have you shame because your Papa and Mama are *mejicanos y indios?*"

"No, Mama. Please. I was only being funny."

"Don't be funny that way. Your Papa's a good man, work in the hat factory, him and Rafael, so you and Angel go to college and sometime be great men. You think that's funny?"

"No, Mama. Forgive me. I was only talking."

Her black eyes pressed curiously into mine. "*Bueno,*" she murmured. "Sit down. I will open some *cervesa.*"

The beer was cold and fresh in my dry mouth. Relaxing. But I could feel the warping heat of the fire. I could see Fortie. And I could see the bird, the bird with the body of a serpent.

When she had plopped her wide seat on a chair, Mama said, "Why do you have fear, Pedro?"

"Fear? What's this? You ask me if I have sickness, then if I have shame, now if I have fear?"

"You have. Don't lie." She glanced down at the table. "You grow up and maybe you start to see some things."

I shivered. "I'm not lying. Would I lie to you, my mother?"

"I think so. *Si.*"

"There was a fire by the gas plant."

She sipped at her glass of beer, sighed, wiped the back of her neck with a damp handkerchief. "So? A fire by the gas plant? You didn't light it," she declared confidently.

"Pepe Gonzalez' train went forward when they were loading coke."

"Pepe was drinking again, that drunk!" Mama shook her head. "His poor woman, ah!"

"No, the train just went, that's all."

"Trains don't do that. The man is a drunkard."

Trains do that. I saw it. And Fortie's voice returned to me: *Do you want to see more?* "Pepe got mad at us," I blurted out.

"Us?"

"Fortie and me. We went to that party I told you Dorothy Mueller was giving, and got tired of it, and . . ."

"You promised you wouldn't go with that one!"

My brother Rafael opened the door of his room, which he shared with Angel. Rubbing his scarred face with his big brown hand, he sat down heavily at the table. "What you two fighting about?" he growled. "Mama, get me a beer."

"*Por favor?*" I said to him.

"Hey, you college boy! You getting big fancy manners, huh? OK, *por favor*, Mama-cita?" She beamed, patted his sweaty shoulder, and got the beer. Rafael lit a cigarette and, smoke rolling from his lips, scowled at me. "Little boy, you have trouble?"

"He was with Fortie O'Rafferty," Mama said.

Rafael mumbled, "He's queer, kid. You stay away from him."

Mama sat down again and said, "His mother is that Sanchez woman."

"So?" I said. "I like Fortie. He's my friend."

"That Sanchez woman," Mama repeated.

"So what? So he's half Spanish and half Irish. Is that some sin among the mighty Martinez family?"

"No," Rafael explained. He took a long drink of his beer, shivered, and walked into his room for a shirt. He was buttoning it up the front when he came back to the table. "She's Mexican—Indian, like us."

"She doesn't look it," I said. She didn't. She looked more like she was Castilian, not Indian.

"She is. From Yucatan, like us. Only, when Papa and Mama and I came up here, she was already here five years.

She was a pretty girl, and smart." Rafael tapped the side of his head. "She married that Irish surveyor there, and came back with him. She already knew all the gringo customs when we got to come live up here."

"Don't say *gringo*, Rafael," Mama warned him.

They were talking like two drunkards. I said, "Both of you sound crazy. You want me to stay away from Fortie because his mother's a Mexican?" They looked at one another. "Well?" I demanded.

"You saw what happened tonight," Mama said. "That fire."

"She is from a different people," Rafael explained patiently. "The people of Chichen Itza. She's from Ixhun." I stared at him. My own brother's mouthing of superstition was almost too much to take. Growing angry with my silence, he said hoarsely, his nostrils flared out, "She'd pass it to her son, *estupido!*"

I stood up. "I'm going to bed," I told them. "You two sit here like old women and spit out your craziness, but I'm getting some sleep."

Rafael sniffed, puffed out a whole mouthful of smoke, and growled at Mama. "Let the child sleep. He'll see the thing

flying at him, like all of us see it sometimes. Then maybe he'll believe."

I had been leaving the room, but I stopped when he said that. "You're crazy," I said. "You need a doctor."

I got little sleep. The dream began a moment after I closed my eyes. I could hear Rafael and Mama talking about me and Fortie and Fortie's mother. When their voices had disappeared, the bird sailed out of the darkness.

It was huge, like a piece of golden and silver mountain cut living from the blackness of space. Its wings seemed not to move, yet it was moving, sailing like some great metallic eagle, its streaming tail feathers longer than a railroad train, feathers which . . . They were not feathers, but part of its body, undulating and serpentine!

Xolotl. I knew his name. I spoke it into the dream, he paused in the heavens above me, and I saw his underside. It was like observing a train by lying in the middle of the tracks and looking up at it.

In the month of Xul, Xolotl shall come with his brother god Quetzalcoatl from the teocalli, the house of the god, in Ixhun. On the day of Chicchan in the sacred city of

Chichen Itza, four maidens will be cast into the cenote, and the god will be pleased.

The strange words then not strange at all, I rose to my feet in my dream. My hair was long, hanging to my shoulders, and I was clothed in a loincloth beaded with calendrical designs. The jungle about me was hot and humid, green and brown and whispering with life. The great city—my city—of Mayapan was nearby in the forest. I would have to bear the message from the monstrous god, see that the sacred orders reached the ears of the priests of Chichen Itza.

I stopped, unsure of myself, after I had trotted a few yards from under the shadow of the feathered serpent still hovering in the air. *What of the train?* I asked him. This I was compelled to ask. I felt confidence in the god with its strange face, and I knew it would understand me despite my formulation of the word "train," unknown to his own language.

The keepers of the teocalli reside in Ixhun. These are my people. They shall be with you always.

And they have powers from the god, I realized. So I turned from him and ran into the forest, into the hot, green

jungle, toward my people in Mayapan. Faster and faster, the message of the god pounding in my blood. Run, run, run, run, run, run, run!

"Pedro?" The hot palm slapped my face hard as the voice chopped like a machete into my dreams.

"Run!" I shouted. "Run!"

The hand slashed out again, and I was awake, sweating and trembling. Rafael and Mama leaning over me, pulling me up, Papa grumbling something in the background. "Get up," Rafael ordered me. "Put some clothes on. Do as I say!"

"Where is Ixhun?" I gasped. "Ixhun!"

"The Sanchez woman comes from Ixhun," Mama said. "Rafael, *por favor*, don't let him go back to sleep now!"

"OK, Mama. Get up, smart college boy!"

It was three o'clock in the morning. I stumbled groggily out to the lighted kitchen where Papa and Mama had already seated themselves at the table. Mama got up to pour me a cup of coffee.

"Why did you all get up?" I said. "Where's Angel?"

"He sleeps," Papa grumbled. "I should sleep, but you have dreams to wake the dead."

"He saw the bird," Mama said.

My father rubbed his broad nose and eyed me skeptically, then said to Mama, "You and Rafael filled him up with that bad talk, eh? No wonder he dreams of some stupid bird!"

Rafael said, "He talked about Ixhun, the place of the god's house."

"Hahahaha! You, my big boy, you ever hear these *norteamericanos* in the hat factory say they see this bird? This nineteen year old baby drank too much *cervesa* and listened to too much dumb stupid talk, so he thinks he sees some bird! It's crazy! Tell me, now, Carmen Olaveides," he said to Mama. "Did you tell this boy that crazy bird had gold and silver for feathers? Huh? Did you say its body is like some snake?"

I said, "She didn't have to. I saw it." Despite his sarcasm and his attempt to sound reasonable, I could see in his face a bitter belief in what he denied.

"So you saw it, Pedrocito?" he demanded. "Come, now! You go to that college with the priests, and you learn many things. Maybe you go to some of those smart priests and you say: Padre, is Quet-

zalcoatl and Xolotl and that fire snake Xiuhcoatl still alive? You know what the priest will say? Huh? You know!"

"Priests don't know everything," Rafael growled. "They are white men. How you expect them to know!"

Papa turned, stuck out his thick arm, and tapped Rafael's chest with his finger. "They know more than a bunch of dumb *indios* like us. They're smart men, those priests who run a college."

"Rafael's right," I said. "They don't know everything."

"Haha! You, Pedrocito, don't you talk to any of them about this bird you see, or they'll say: You dumb Mexican kid, you go back to the jungle where you come from!"

"Miguel," Mama said. Papa glanced uneasily at her. "Miguel, you burned sacrifice to the god with me near Uxmal. Both of us."

Papa's face grew bleak. In a low voice he said, "It means nothing, woman. I was young, then, and in the jungles, just some stupid *peon*. Now we live in the United States many years. There is no god here."

"Papa," I said. "I saw him."

"Bueno. You look tomorrow and see if he is around. You see if you can find him. Then

you take a gun and shoot him, and you'll find maybe he's only a chippie bird you dream about. No!" He flapped his hand to keep me from arguing. "Don't talk back! I'm going to bed and forget I live with such a pack of fools!"

I spoke to the priest. Words still linger in my mind about it, few words, words of fright from what I was then realizing I carried in my blood.

"... sound crazy, Father."

"I won't make fun of you."

"I saw Xolotl last night. . . . a golden bird, a — a god. Some dumb Indians used to believe . . ."

"Are you a dumb Indian?"

"No, I am not a dumb Indian, Priest. I saw Xolotl, the god of my fathers. He and Quetzalcoatl are to come in the month of Xul, and four maidens . . ."

"Your imagination, young man. Dreams aren't real. Look, now. You've taken college biology. Did you ever learn of any phyla of birds or beasts including your feathered snake?"

And all I could do was shake my head and feel more like a dumb stupid *indio*.

I can't remember exactly what time it was that afternoon when I saw Dorthy Mueller, the girl who had

given the party last night. Some talk, again, not dumb Indian talk, but wild learning from a girl with a pony tail and blue eyes.

"You certainly took off in a hurry last night."

"We were just hot, and we wanted to take a walk to . . ."

"We?"

"Fortie and me."

"You didn't go with Fortie. You went alone."

(No, girl, I was not alone. I was with Xolotl, the god!)

"I went with Fortie!"

"Well, look, Pete, if you don't have a good time somewhere, you certainly don't have to . . ."

Laughter from that frightened Pedro Martinez. "... had your fun. You knocked your heads together and said: Let's play a joke on Pete."

Then she was gone.

It ate at me all afternoon. What had happened last night, I swore to myself, was hallucination: when the fire started, Fortie probably went somewhere else to get a better look. And Pepe Gonzalez was mad and afraid we'd tell everybody. What I saw on the tracks wasn't a bird, even a chippie, much less Xolotl. And after all that superstitious talk with Mama and Rafael, what else could I dream about. Finally, what I guessed about

Dorthy Mueller was true: she and Fortie were playing a joke.

I got off two blocks from my stop and went to his house to check that out.

"Pachook," Fortie said. "How's doin'?"

"Hi," I said. I stood just inside the door. "I saw Dottie Mueller today. She let me in on the joke."

"What joke?"

"Come on, get off it. It's over."

"What joke?" he repeated. His green eyes were bright like the eyes of a bird.

I sighed. "All right, then. When you and I left the party . . ."

"You missed the best part of the party, amigo."

"Pepe Gonzalez saw you with me, Fortie."

"You in trouble or something? Look—"

I slammed the door shut behind me, stopped for a minute to get a breath, and cursed at myself. He was carrying it through like a master, damn him! But it didn't matter.

Even when I walked into the house in the middle of supper and everybody looked at me and nobody said a word until Papa said, "Pepe Gonzalez was here about you, Pedrocito."

None of it mattered any more, so I would stop it, end it then and there. I said, "Don't talk to me about Pepe Gonzalez or anybody else! *Comprenden?* Nothing more about it."

None of them argued. In my room I shivered. I was sweating heavily, but cold, shaking and chattering. Not with fear or worry or anything of the kind. Just a chill.

. . . come with his brother god from the teocalli in Ixhun. On the day of Chicchan in the city of Chichen Itza, four maidens . . .

"Rafael!"

My brother came out of his chair and bounded through my door. "*Que ocurre?*" he cried.

"What did he say? What did Pepe say?"

"Stand still! Quiet! I'm here!"

"What-did-he-say?"

"He don't think it was Fortie with you, Pedrocito."

"Who, then? Rafael, who?"

Rafael grabbed my arm. "You come out with all of us. It's better." His hand was shaking. "Pedrocito," he whispered. "Sometimes it comes to all of us."

"Why? Why does it have to?"

"We're *indios*, little brother.

(Continued on page 130)



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FOREIGN Employment information—\$1. Parks, Box 1665A, Lake City, Seattle 55, Washington.

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(Continued)

PEN PALS

LOOKING For correspondents who share your interests? This would be a perfect spot for you to place a classified ad. Only 25¢ per word including name and address. Send orders and remittance to **FANTASTIC**, One Park Avenue, New York City 16, New York.

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WANTED: Argosy for December 16th, 1933. Will pay top price. Quote to Lewis D. Harrell, 2538 20th Place, West, Birmingham 8, Alabama.

MISCELLANEOUS

2 **WAR** Arrowheads, scalping knife, Thunderbird. \$4.00. Catalog 10¢, Arrowhead, Glenwood, Ark.

KNOW Yourself Scientific handwriting analysis. \$2. Send 12 lines, unlined paper. Patricia Peery, B. A. Soc., P. O. Box 1553, Cleveland 4, Ohio.

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ASTROLOGICAL Challenge to scoffers: Temporarily, will cast chart, analyze writing almost free, \$1, stamped envelope, month, day, year (time, place). Joan Merrill, 31 Alpine Road, East Weymouth 89, Mass.

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BOY Studies, color photographs and slides. For free sample, write to Blue Star Studio, 33 Mantea Avenue, Hampton, Va.

MAIDENS FOR THE CENOTE

(Continued from page 128)

It is in our soul." He caught his breath. "Come out now."

Both of us stopped at the kitchen doorway. Fortie, pale-faced, had walked in from the porch and was standing there waiting with his hands hanging dumbly at his sides. Ignoring my people, he said, "Hey, amigo, I made it all up! It was Pepe Gonzalez' fault last night."

I gritted my teeth. "Who said it wasn't?"

"Look, kid, it was a joke, see? I said to Dottie: Let's go play a game with Pete,

and that's what happened—"

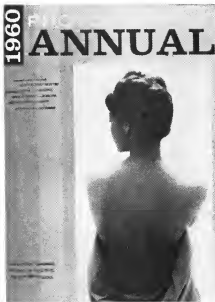
I heard the rush of great golden wings somewhere in the space behind me, and I heard a voice speaking words in an old language. Fortie was right. It was a big joke. It was very funny.

I laughed and laughed, while the rushing sound of those wings, like the roar of a locomotive, like the roar of a wing-whipped fire, smashed into me. But I did not continue to laugh. Serious matters needed to be taken care of. Four maidens. **THE END**

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